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BLACK GOLD

ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE

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By ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE



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FOREWORD

If you are questing for character-study or for realism or for true literature in any of its forms,—then walk around this book of mine (and, indeed, any book of mine); for it was not written for you and it will have no appeal for you.

But if you care for a yarn with lots of action,—some of it pretty exciting,—you may like “BLACK GOLD.” I think you will.

It has all the grand old tricks: from the Weirdly Vanishing Footprints, to the venerable Ride for Life. Yes, and it embalms even the half-forgotten and long-disused Struggle on the Cliff. Its Hero is a hero. Its Villain is a villain. Nobody could possibly mistake either of them for the Friend of the Family. The Heroine is just a heroine; not a human. There is not a subtle phrase or a disturbingly new thought, from start to finish.

There is a good mystery, too; along lines which have not been worked over-often. And there is a glimpse of Untold Treasure. What better can you ask; in a story that is frank melodrama?

The scene, by the way, is laid in Northern California; a beautiful and strikingly individualistic region which, for the most part, is ignored by tourists for the

man-made scenic effects and playgrounds of the southern counties of the State.

If, now and again, my puppets or my plot-wires creak a bit noisily,—what then? Creaking, at worst, is a sure indication of movement,—of action,—of incessant progress of sorts. A thing that creaks is not standing still and gathering mildew. It moves. Otherwise it could not creak.

Yes, there are worse faults to a plot than an occasional tendency to creakiness. It means, for one thing, that numberless skippable pages are not consumed in photographic description of the ill-assorted furnishings of the heroine's room or cosmos; nor in setting forth the myriad phases of thought undergone by the hero in seeking to check the sway of his pet complexes. (This drearily flippant slur on realism springs from pure envy. I should rejoice to write such a book. But I can't. And, if I could, I know I should never be able to stay awake long enough to correct its proofs.)

Yet, there is something to be said in behalf of the man or woman who finds guilty joy in reading a story whose action gallops; a story whose runaway pace breaks its stride only to leap a chasm or for a breath-catching stumble on a precipice-edge. The office boy prefers Captain Kidd to Strindberg; not because he is a boy, but because he is human and has not yet learned the trick of disingenuousness. He is still normal. So is the average grown-up.

These normal and excitement-loving readers are overwhelmingly in the majority. Witness the fact that "The Bat" had a longer run in New York than

have all of Dunsany's and Yeats's rare dramas, put together. If we insist that our country be guided by majority-rule, then why sneer at a majority-report in literary tastes?

"Ben Hur" was branded as "a religious dime novel." Yet it has had fifty times the general vogue of Anatole France's exquisite pseudo-blasphemy which deals with the same period. Public taste is not always, necessarily, bad taste. "The common people heard Him, gladly." (The Scribes did not.)


After all, there is nothing especially debasing in a taste for yarns which drip with mystery and suspense and ceaseless action; even if the style and concept of these yarns be grossly lacking in certain approved elements. So the tale be written with strong evidence of sincerity and with a dash of enthusiasm, why grudge it a small place of its own in readers' hours of mental laziness?

With this shambling apology,—which, really, is no apology at all,—I lay my book on your knees. You may like it or you may not. You will find it alive with flaws. But, it is alive.

I don't think it will bore you. Perhaps there are worse recommendations.

ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE.

"Sunnybank"
Pompton Lakes,
New Jersey.



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CHAPTER ONE

THE man awoke—uncomfortably aware of two things. First, that he had been asleep by broad daylight and when he should have been alertly on duty. Second, that some overwhelming danger menaced him.

The roused sleeper was Toni, the Basco sheep herder of the Gale-O'Rell ranch. He was a surly giant; a product of the Pyrenees regions; and sourly discontented with everything in America;—most discontented of all with his Yankee employers and with his task of keeping their sheep from straying.

Toni, awakened by some occult sixth sense, lay quite still. His head was resting on a stone in the far corner of the Gale-O'Rell Number Three sheep range. His body was sprawled supine on the ground.

He could see the bunch of sheep,—some two thousand in all,—grazing stolidly here and there, athwart the rolling pasture; and, on a knoll a furlong away, squatted Zit, the little black collie that was their official guard and guide.

No, Toni had not been startled from sleep by any stampede or by the dog's barking. He realized that. Yet, as his senses gradually sharpened to complete

wakefulness, he was more and more impressed by the feeling of peril.

His arm felt heavy, across his chest; and instinctively he made as though to move it. Then he felt that both his arms were pillowing his tousled head from the hardness of the stone beneath. And he glanced down at his breast, to see what weight was on it.

His drowsy glance froze into a stare of stark horror.

There, coiled lazily on the man's bare and hairy upper chest, lay a five-foot rattlesnake.

The reptile had crawled thither, presumably, for warmth against the chilly breeze of the early spring day. Though Toni's muscles remained rigidly moveless in the first terror of his discovery, yet some tensing of sinews or some involuntary catch of his breath must have jarred the reptile.

For, lifting its fleshless three-cornered head from among its glossy folds, the snake set up a growingly sharp whirr of its rattles.

Toni was sick with fright. He shut his eyes, to blot out the fearsome spectacle of sudden death; and an unconquerable tremor convulsed him.

Again, at this faint movement, the snake whirred its warning rattle. And, to the Basco's added horror, the rattle was answered from somewhere on the ground within six inches of his ear. Toni understood. Within striking distance of him was not only the snake on his chest, but the creature's mate.

Toni forced his shuddering body to deadly movelessness. He tried to pray to his saints. But long abstinence from prayer had rusted his memory for such

things. He strove wildly against the impulse to leap to his feet and rush off, screaming. He knew, soon or late, his nerves must give way under the strain. Then the end would come. And he braced himself for the wait.

Meantime, through his anguish of suspense, he found brain-space for the ardent cursing of one of the two men he worked for. This man was Barry Gale. It was Gale who had leased the little Number Three range where the sheep now were grazing. He had leased it for three months longer; instead of following the advice of his partner, Dick O'Rell, that the bunch of sheep be sent two months early to their mountain pasturage, on the government grazing land, over in the Tuscan Peaks region.

Toni had looked forward longingly to this season of summer pasturage among the quiet mountains. He would be far away from his nosy employers and free to loaf outrageously on the job; while his tiny black collie, Zit, would wear down pads and flesh by extra herding work.

It was Toni who had suggested to O'Rell that the snows were gone from the lower mountain passes by now; and that an early exodus from the plain would not only save lease-money, but would give the flock the advantage of grazing on the new grass of the uplands, before all the other ranchers of Tehama County should send their sheep to the hills for the summer.

Had Toni's advice and O'Rell's been followed by the pig-headed Gale, the herder would now be miles away from this miserable rolling meadow and from the brace

of murderous rattlesnakes about to kill him. Wherefore, the Basco mingled his efforts at prayer with far more successfully eloquent efforts at cursing Barry Gale. And, between times, he sweated and froze with terror.

All this century of torment in the space of perhaps twenty seconds. But its intensity kept the Basco from seeing anything but the vibrating three-cornered head, with its ice-black bead eyes and the two pinpoint "pits" below them. These and the forked tongue. He was deaf to all but that low dual whirring.

Perhaps that was why he was oblivious to the springy tread of feet over the grayish-green cropped grass and to the stocky figure of a man who was strolling in his general direction from across the rutted red lane which bisected the grazing ground.

Barry Gale, Marylander by birth and Californian by enthusiastic adoption, was taking this short cut home to his little ranch house, from a two-hour business session with the County Agent at Red Bluff, a few miles to southward.

Inspecting his flourishing young orchards of navel oranges, early that morning, he had come upon stray signs of the dread mealybug scourge. And, in haste, he had betaken himself to the County Agent for help and advice;—on precisely the same principle that sends a man with sudden cardiac pangs to the nearest heart specialist. As he walked homeward, now, he was repeating over to himself, for better surety of remembering:

"Five gallons of distillate emulsion.—Ten pounds of

soap powder.—Water, one hundred gallons.—Average cost, about three-quarters cent per gallon.—When the bottom of the spray tank is——”

Gale broke off in his lesson's recital, with a grunt of disgust. He had entered the pasture. Subconsciously, he had taken in the general details of the scene before him:—the gray-green rolling land beneath the miracle of the California blue sky, with the giant emerald mountains, beyond, standing guard over the rich Sacramento Valley, and with Shasta's eternal snows dazzling the eye far to northward;—the shifting gray-white groups of grazing sheep, and their absurdly small black collie sentinel on a knoll in the field's center.

All this had photographed itself, mechanically, on Gale's brain. It was a scene that could be duplicated a thousand times within a thousand miles. But there was one vital detail lacking, a detail which was certain to catch and hold any rancher's irritated notice, a detail whose absence drove from Gale's throat that grunt of vexation.

In other words, the picture lacked the inevitable figure of the statuelike herder, brooding over his flock. No herder was visible. Toni, apparently, was not on the job.

As his worried eyes roamed the field, Barry Gale presently saw a patch of faded blue denim between the chewed branches of a corner bush. And thither he bent his steps.

At the rancher's heels trotted Roy, his big gold-and-white collie—a show-type dog—as different as day

and night from the square-built and wideheaded little Zit. Roy caught Toni's scent, just as Gale caught the glimpse of blue shirt. And in mild interest the collie padded along beside his master, to investigate the phenomenon of a herdsman who was lying drowsily under a bush in broad daylight.

Before the two had traversed more than half the ninety feet of distance which separated them from Toni, the collie halted abruptly in his tracks, his aristocratic long nose wrinkling in disfavor, his dark eyes aglint with wrath. In his furry throat a warning growl was born.

The dog's nearsighted eyes had not discovered the presence of the huge coiled snake on Toni's chest, nor of the reptile's mate on the ground, six inches from the helpless man's shoulder. But a whiff of breeze had just brought him the scent of both serpents;—the nauseating crushed-cucumber smell common to all varieties of pit-viper. And he checked his lazy trot with much suddenness. A collie hates and fears poisonous snakes.

Gale was too much of a dogman to disregard his collie's warning. He stopped, alongside Roy, and glanced around him. He could see nothing to warrant the growl. To his ears, faintly, came a whirring sound that might well have been made by a locust and to which he gave no heed.

Presently, the rancher began to move forward again, but cautiously and with every faculty strained to observation. Roy moved forward with him in visible and growing reluctance, his shoulder pressed close to his

master's knee, deep muttering growls still swelling far down in his throat.

Ten feet away from the recumbent Toni, Gale stopped his advance. He had seen the herder's face. It was not a pretty sight.

Its sheer hideousness of green-white complexion, up-rolled eyeballs, panic-grinning teeth and distorted muscles was enough to startle any beholder.

As he gazed, lips parted for an exclamation of amazement, Gale heard, louder and fiercer, the whirr of the two rattlers. And, his eyes shifting from Toni's awful face to the big dark smudge on his bare chest, he saw the smudge resolve itself into a coiled serpent.

Gale wasted not the fraction of an instant in preparing. In his fist was his knobbed walking stick. Instinctively, he caught it by the ferrule and swung it as though it had been a golf club. His early prowess on Maryland links gave him speed and accuracy. There was dire need for both.

To smite downward at the snake was not only to endanger Toni's ribs,—which could have knit together again in a short time,—but to run the almost certain chance that the rattler, smitten and broken, might strike the Basco again and again in its death struggles.

This danger flashed into Gale's mind and into Toni's as well as the club went aloft. Changing the direction of the stroke, Gale swung for the snake's head as though he were making a drive on the links.

Seeing the stick go up, Toni caught his breath. The sharp contraction of his chest made the rattler's last shred of hesitancy vanish. The snake struck.

His darting head was a bare inch from Toni's naked throat when the whizzing handle of Gale's stick landed. Full on the side of the outflying neck it struck, and with a skilled force that threw the rattler's whole body clear of Toni's chest. Leaping across the prone Basco, Gale landed with both heavy soles on the back of the wounded snake, driving his heel with full force into the writhing coils.

Then he turned back. Toni had not stirred. Close to his ear was buzzing the second rattler's warning. He dared not so much as cry out to the unsuspecting Gale.

The rancher strode up to him. But, as he did so, Roy flashed in front of his master; directly ahead of the descending right foot. In flashed the collie, and out again.

Roy had nipped at the snake, coiled so close to Gale's toe; had scarred the shimmering body with one of his curved eye-teeth, and had flung himself back and to one side barely in time to avoid the lightning-dart of the snake's head.

Thus, of old, had the collie's wolf ancestors fought such venomous serpents as they could not elude. But those ancestors had fought for their own lives. Their descendant was fighting to save his master.

Before the dog could rush in again, the rattler's motion had caught Gale's eye. And the man understood that the augmented buzzing sound was not caused merely by the other snake that lay thrashing its poisonous life out, a few feet behind him.

Down came the stick,—clubwise, this time,—and the second rattler's back was broken.

"Get up!" ordered Gale, kicking aside the squirmingly impotent body, and addressing the palsied Basco. "Get up, man! There's no more danger. Of course," he added with wasted sarcasm, "if you want to go on with your snooze, you can stay where you are. No other pair of diamond-backs is likely to drop in on you, to-day."

Slowly, shiveringly, Toni got to his feet. He looked at one slain snake; then at the other; last of all at the faintly amused Gale. Then, drawing a quivering breath, the man began to speak; in the barbarous Basque patois which Gale, with all his more than tolerable knowledge of French, found such difficulty in understanding.

"I hated you," began Toni, thickly. "I called down a curse on you. I wasted your time that you paid me for. I did all this. And—and you have saved me from death. Not alone by your courage, but by your brain. If you had struck down—*so!*—the snake on my breast must have died. But also he must have killed me, as he died. You saved me. In my hate for you, I had a thought to hurt you by poisoning that dog you love. Yet, it was he that found the other snake and made you see it before it could strike me or you. *Mon maitre*, you have made me much ashamed. I do not ask forgiveness. But,—but I am your man, from henceforth."

As Gale was straining every faculty to catch the full meaning of the mumbled patois words, the Basco ceased

speaking and bent quickly down. Before the ranchman could so much as guess at his intent, Toni had caught Gale's calloused hand in both of his own and had kissed its tanned knuckles.

Gale jerked away his caressed fingers, embarrassed and vexed at the Basco's action. With all a true Anglo-Saxon's aversion for a scene, he laughed into the herder's earnest face and said:

"That's all right, Toni. I could have made the stroke better with a mid-iron. But, at that, I didn't 'slice.' If you feel you owe me any debt, just pay it by staying awake on the job after this. As for poisoning Roy,—well, the man who poisons a dog will never go down to hell when he dies. Do you know why? Because all the people down there would refuse to let such a black-guard in, for fear he might corrupt them and give the place a worse name than it has. You're not that kind of man, Toni. No upstanding man could have done it. But I see now why Roy has always disliked you."

The herder listened, with profound respect and credulity, to this astounding bit of theology. Then, timidly, he moved over to where Roy,—tongue out, tulip ears pricked, head on one side,—was watching the last struggles of the snakes.

"*Mon vieux*," the Basco addressed the collie. "I thank you. And I ask your pardon. I would seek to be your friend, if you will permit."

He held out his hand as he spoke. Roy looked at him, long and critically; then gravely thrust his cold nose into the Basco's palm, in token of friendliness. Toni petted the collie's silken head; and was about to

speak again when Barry Gale put an end to the maudlin performance by whistling Roy to heel and continuing his homeward walk.

Gale's sole reaction from the episode was one of amusement and of a light contempt for his herder's exhibition of Gallic melodrama. Densely ignorant of the queer Basque nature, Barry had not the remotest idea that he had just won for himself a fiery devotion as complete as Roy's own—a devotion which, one day, might be worth more to him than any offensive or defensive weapon ever forged by mortal man.

Barry Gale was the son of a progressive Chesapeake farmer, who had trained his boy to the paternal profession; only to have Barry, at twenty, turn his back on the farm and announce his intent of becoming a doctor. Followed a three-year medical course, and then a small start in Baltimore as a physician.

Just as Barry was beginning to get on his feet in his chosen trade, a woman had come into his life. She was not a woman of the vampire type such as exists in the movies and seldom elsewhere.

Maida Drace was an unspoiled girl; daughter of Jared Drace, the arch-financier who in those days was employed in standing Wall Street on its head and grabbing the cash that cascaded from its upturned pockets. She had come to Baltimore to visit a school friend and to recuperate from the fatigues of her first "season." There, Barry had met her.

At once, he had fallen crazily in love. It was his first love affair. And it took heavy toll of him. Be-

fore he could put his fate to the touch by telling Maida of his adoration, he learned that she was the only child of the incalculably rich Jared Drace. In his perhaps foolishly sensitive soul, her enormous wealth and his own poverty were impassable obstacles to his hopes.

He ceased to call on her; and tried—with wretchedly bad success,—to put her out of his memory. Soon afterward, he heard that she had gone back to New York.

It was one of those youthful tragedies at which wise men laugh in later life. But it cut deep into the soul of Barry Gale. For he was not of the sort that can love or cease to love, at will. It disgusted him with himself and with his surroundings. He longed for change of some sort,—of any sort.

So when, a few months later, his father died, leaving him fifteen thousand dollars and leaving the farm to another son, Barry gladly accepted the invitation of his cousin, Dick O'Rell, to pool their mutual cash and to go out to California as ranchmen.

All this had been four years earlier. For more than three years the two cousins had toiled early and late, to make a financial success of their six hundred acre Tehama County ranch. And, because they lived plainly and worked hard and had a knowledge of their profession and were progressive enough to profit by the teachings of the government and of their County Agent, they were succeeding.

Their sheep were pitifully few, by comparison to the Wilcox and Ellenwood flocks. But they were profitable. The navel orange orchard,—planted, but

neglected, by their predecessor,—was on a more than paying basis. On a small scale they were imitating the Sale method of barley growing; and with as much success in their own lesser way.

Then, a year or two earlier, they had been among the pioneers of Northern California's rice-growers. And this rice crop alone was now netting them more money per year than all their other ventures combined. The silty, clayey soil of one of their sheep pastures,—little better than hard pan,—had proven ideal for rice-growing. And they were selling this crop, in the paddy, for more dollars per bushel than they could have gotten for any other grain by the cartload.

Altogether, the cousins had prospered, mightily. Yet, deep down in Barry's heart, burned the memory of the girl he loved and whose wealth put her as far beyond his reach as though she were living on the planet Neptune.

He did not let the memory make him gloomy or interfere with his myriad everyday interests. But it was always there. He told himself, from time to time, that he was beginning to forget. Yet, he knew he was making lamentably slow progress.

The old wound had received a new twinge, a year earlier, when news reached him, in a roundabout way, that a New York capitalist had just bought a five-thousand-acre tract of mountain-and-ranch land, along the Sacramento River, near the Iron Canyon—a tract whose southern boundaries bordered a part of his own ranch—and was employing a horde of laborers to erect thereon a huge stone house. The twinge came

when he learned that this capitalist was Jared Drace.

He was not surprised that any millionaire should buy so picturesquely beautiful an estate and should build thereon a house worthy of its surroundings. Many an Easterner was finding Northern California an ideal place for such a winter home. But that it should have been Maida Drace's father, of all men!

And, even while Barry cursed the amazing coincidence, his supposedly half-healed heart hammered madly at the prospect of seeing Maida again.

Though Gale schooled himself to remember that Maida could never be anything to him and that his only peace of mind must lie in keeping entirely away from her, yet he felt vaguely miserable when he heard, later, that Maida had not accompanied Drace on his journey to California.

According to neighborhood rumors, the multimillionaire was living in a somewhat eccentric fashion at his new big house in the midst of his wilderness tract. His family were not there. Nor was there any such retinue of servants as people had been led to expect. Except for his secretary, Wolfe Naylor,—a tall and saturnine man whom Gale had seen once or twice in the Red Bluff bank,—and for a body-servant named Sludge, and three or four Chinaboys, Drace lived alone.

Thus he had been living for the past six months. Nor, so report said, had he once stirred from off his own estate. There were none of the gay house-parties, none of the conferences with fellow-magnates, none of the mingling with local interests, which folk are

wont to associate with a great landowner's country life. Jared Drace, apparently, had come to this wonderland, to live as a hermit. The one or two neighbors who,—in California's infinitely hospitable manner,—had called to welcome him to the region, had been received by Wolfe Naylor and had not had so much as a glimpse of Drace, himself.

If the house was short of servants, the estate itself was not tenantless. Tehama County had discovered, to its wondering amusement, that the land was patrolled by not less than twenty khaki-clad guards, who lived in a long stone barracks building, not far from the main house.

These guards carried rifle or automatic and turned back all chance trespassers they met. Such a proceeding, in friendly California, woke the mirthful amaze of the county. By the time this bit of news had been talked over to boredom, came a second fillip to local curiosity.

A steep little stone gorge,—a sort of vertebra to Iron Canyon,—ran through one end of the estate, to the south, where a tongue of Drace's land jutted into Gale's. For the past few months, gangs of laborers had been working in double shifts in this tiny gorge. They had not been local laborers, but had been imported from somewhere east of the Sierras; and were kept from mingling with the folk of the region. From the direction of the gorge by day and by night had come the eternal sound of hammering, of digging, of windlass and chain and engine and of occasional blasts.

This kind of thing, of course, had been too much

for neighborhood curiosity. Many an idler had strayed over the boundary line and had made futile effort to learn what the secret new enterprise might be,—which was calling for day and night shifts and so much racket. But, always, a guard was somewhere on hand to turn back the curious. And the nature of the work remained a mystery.

Of late, one batch of laborers after another had been taken down to Red Bluff, by night, and loaded onto the southbound trains. Thus, it was inferred, the task was nearing its end.

Some gossips hinted at the sinking of a shaft for gold. But wiser men pointed to the carloads of cement and structural steel which had been shipped by truck from station to the estate; and declared these things were not germane to mining. So the mystery held.

It was not a mystery which interested Barry Gale, overmuch; though his garrulous cousin, Dick O'Rell, had wasted much lung-power in conjectures about it. Maida was not at the Drace estate. That was enough—in relief and in sorrow—for Barry to know. Wherefore, he stuck to his own work and used up his surplus energies in the task of trying to forget the girl who, innocently, had so changed the current of his life.

To-day, as Gale quitted the sheep range and the shakily grateful Basco, he quickened his step. The afternoon was drowsing toward sunset. Barry wanted to get home in time to mix the mealybug spray for the following morning's use, before he must make his evening rounds of the ranch. He had spent more time

in Red Bluff than he had intended to. And he was needed at home.

Leaving the pasture, he skirted the jut of rockily uneven woodland where Jared Drace's grounds dove-tailed into his own. By making a short cut through this tongue of woods he could save nearly a quarter mile on his homeward trip. He had often done this, in other days, before the big estate was bought by Drace. Of late, respect for the myriad "No Trespass" signs, rather than any fear of the truculent armed guards, had kept him off his unneighborly neighbor's land.

But this afternoon, in his haste and in the abstraction of his mind, he forgot to turn to the left, as he reached the woods. Instead, absentmindedly, he stopped, and climbed through the narrow gap between the high fence's wire strands.

The air in the woods was cool, after the glare of sun, and the light filtered down duskily through the arched boughs. The pine-needles made a soft carpet to the man's tired feet after his long trudge over hard roads and uneven sward. Gale paid scant heed to these allurements, as he strode on. For, as became a farmer, he had schooled himself to enjoy the myriad beauties of nature without letting them delay his business.

The forest was made up of lofty pine and redwood. The trees arched high above, and there was no undergrowth to impede his steps. Fantastic boulders reared their heads here and there, like prehistoric monsters, above the drifts of brown pine-needles. Great misshapen black pine-cones, half as large as a man's head,

were scattered here and there. Over all brooded a mystic greenish half-light and the stillness of death.

Giving no conscious note to the eerie atmosphere of the wood, Barry moved on. Yet, without realizing it, some sense of the place's stark loneliness must have come to him. For he glanced around for Roy.

The collie was not at his heels. For an instant, Gale wondered, regretfully, at this defection. Then he remembered that, as he turned into the wood, Roy had been galloping ahead, in pursuit of a ground squirrel. The dog had not seen his master enter the wood. Roy knew they were bound for the ranch house. When he should cease from his vain chase of the squirrel, he would undoubtedly continue his homeward journey; under the impression that his master was following close behind. So near home, the dog was not likely to bother about casting back for Barry's trail.

Still haunted by that unconfessed sense of loneliness, here in the dark woods, Barry drew in a breath, to call the absent dog to him. The breath was exhaled in a low whistle of surprise; as, at his feet, he chanced to see an object which would have been far more in keeping in a Fifth Avenue shop window than here in the Iron Canyon woods.

Nearly five years earlier, a Canadian lumberman had had his foot crushed by a trolley car, while on a visit to his mother in Baltimore. Gale had set the broken bones and had done it so skillfully that the victim could at last walk with no vestige of lameness. In gratitude, when he paid the nominal bill charged by Barry, the lumberman had given Barry two ermine skins which

he had brought all the way down from Alberta with him as curios. Barry had had the skins made into a cardcase-purse, and had given it to Maida Drace. It had been an unusual present and had had a wrought clasp as unique as itself.

This ermine purse, now, almost five years later, lay at Barry Gale's feet, here in the California forest.

The man picked it up, wonderingly. Forgotten was his haste; forgotten was everything else that pertained to the present time.

The worn white purse between his brown hands, he stood staring unseeingly at it; half his mind a blank of bewilderment, the other half of it racing wildly.

He was back in Maryland. It was the evening of Maida's birthday. Nell Carrington, her hostess, was giving the New York guest a jolly little birthday party. Gale was invited to it. With him he brought the quaint purse he had just had made for her. With him, too, he brought a decision to tell Maida, that very night, of his overwhelming love for her.

She had been so childishly delighted over the little gift, and she had thanked him so sweetly! Then,—what was the phrasing of the tidings Nell Carrington had told him after Maida had passed on to another room with another man? What was it? Oh, yes! She had said:

“A purse was the most appropriate thing you could have brought her. She has all the money in the world, and she ought to have more things to put it all in.”

He had asked what she meant. And he had learned then for the first time that Maida Drace was the only

child of *the* Drace—the multimillionaire, the Croesus who was reputed to be one of the five richest men in America! And he—he, Barry Gale—was a struggling young doctor whose whole yearly practice was not worth fifteen hundred dollars. And he had been about to ask Maida to share that princely poverty with him! He had gone home early, that night, on a plea of some needful professional call. And he had never again seen Maida.

Yet here, in his hands, was his pretty gift to her! Here in this strip of North California woodland, almost four thousand miles away from the city where he and she had met. For perhaps a full minute, the man stood turning the fur purse over and over, and trying to still the keen pain that stabbed at his heart as memory re-awoke and tore loose from the pitiful bonds wherewith he had sought to bind it down.

Then sanity came back. And Gale began to think more clearly.

There was nothing astounding about this discovery, after all. Now that he stopped to think it over, the only astonishing thing about it was that the girl should have troubled herself to keep so insignificant a gift for so long a time.

He was on her father's land;—although he had not paused to consider this act of trespass. Maida doubtless had come out to Tehama County to visit Drace or even to make her home with him. She had been strolling through this wood, and had chanced to drop her purse. The whole thing was quite natural.

Yet, this knowledge, strangely, did not abate the

overmastering thrill which had encompassed Barry at sight of the ermine bauble. Rather, it sent that thrill mounting to his brain, dizzying him.

Maida was here! She was within a mile or two of him, at most! Fate had brought her back to him; in spite of all his quixotic resolves to forget her.

Briefly, common sense and his careful plan of campaign struggled against the vibrant impulse which mastered him. He told himself that he had prepared, months earlier, for just such a contingency as this. He reminded himself that he had vowed to keep away from her, should Maida come to Tehama County. As Drace lived like a recluse it was not likely the financier had so much as heard the names of his neighbors. Maida need never know, perhaps, that she and Barry were living so near to each other.

All this, Gale now told himself for the fiftieth time. Which was all the good it did him. For, even as he recounted his excellent resolutions, his active legs were striding fast in a direction at right angles to the one they had been following.

He had faced to the East and was hastening toward the sharp ridge which rose a quarter mile in front of him and which cut off from his view the main part of Jared Drace's estate. From the top of that ridge, probably, he could see the chimneys of the big house itself; or, at any rate, could find some landmark to guide him toward Maida's home.

She had dropped this purse, here in the woods. Perhaps she had dropped it only a few minutes earlier. Perhaps even now she might be just beyond the ridge.

At the possibility, Barry Gale's fast walk merged into a run.

Afterward, there would be plenty of time for him to kick himself for a born fool for not letting ill enough alone and for tearing open a wound that had never wholly healed. Afterward, it would be time to recall that his position in life and Maida's were still approximately as they had been;—that he was merely a prosperous small rancher, while she was the heiress to something over a hundred million dollars.

Much could be remembered,—and regretted,—afterward. For the moment, the only worthwhile fact in all life was that he and Maida Drace were in the same part of the world again and that every swinging step was bringing him nearer to her. What was to happen when they should meet,—whether, indeed, she would so much as remember who he was,—Barry had not the slightest idea.

Nor did he care. His starved heart was putting wings into his flying feet. And the ridge was close in front of him.

The nature of the ground had changed, in the past quarter mile. Gone were the smoothly rolling undulations. The wood was scraggy and gaunt. Instead of boulders, now, there cropped out everywhere huge blocks of black mineral,—volcanic rock of a long-past æon,—dull and sinister and in cubes well nigh as regular as if they had been hewn by some monster hand.

There were gashes in the dull black earth, too; scars of long ago fissures, in the days when Mount Lassen's volcano still had the same effect on the surrounding

country as has Vesuvius's. The scene was such as Dürer loved, in his morbidness, to sketch;—such a scene as forms the back-and-foreground of his *Death and the Knight*.

Behind, a bare half mile back, were spring sunshine and the warmly lovely North California landscape with its endless miles of smiling ranchland and of blossoming pink peach trees against a dreamy wall of snow mountains. But, here in the gaunt forest, Nature was in her most sinister mood.

As far as Barry was concerned, he did not know nor care whether his thudding soles smote against basalt blocks or roseleaves. Somewhere ahead was the girl who was all in all to him; the girl he had never learned to forget. That was everything in life which mattered.

The ridge,—a precipice-like outcrop of volcanic rock which covered a long wrinkle of earth, some seventy feet high, thrown up by a prehistoric eruption,—reared itself in black masses of lava and basalt, to check his progress. Up it he went;—a breath-and-muscle-testing climb whose difficulties he did not note in his eagerness to get to the top.

Not for a year or more had he climbed this cliff-like rise. Dimly, he remembered that there was some sort of a gully or narrow wooded valley beyond; and then a succession of abrupt hills, one of which was cut transversely by a gorge. Up somewhere in that tumble of volcanic hills, was Jared Drace's house. There,—or between here and there,—was Maida Drace.

The steeply arduous climb started Gale's mind on a

new tack. His only reason for believing Maida was here rested on his finding of the ermine purse. Was it not strongly possible that she had tired of the thing, long ago, and had given it to some servant of the family? Or perhaps to some one else connected with her father's household? Might not this "some one else" have dropped it? Might not Maida herself still be in New York?

He breasted the summit, and paused; while his anxious gaze swept the country in front of him. Ahead, the sun was setting in a dazzle of yellow glory. Barry's eyes, accustomed to the dusk of the woods, blinked as the level rays smote athwart them.

He took off his cap and held it to shield his brows from the glare and to permit him to see beneath it.

As he was lifting the cap, something whisked it sharply out of his hand. At the same moment, the venomous snap of a rifle sent crackling echoes out of every rock and cleft for a mile around.

Barry, dazedly, glanced down at his cap. It lay on a black volcanic rock, a few feet away from him;—a bullet hole drilled neatly through it.

Gale throbbed with a hot gust of anger. Often he had seen armed guards patrolling Drace's land. Oftener, he had heard of their brutal threats to trespassers. But he could not bring himself to believe that one of them could have fired, without warning, and in daylight, at a harmless intruder like himself. He stared angrily around him. His eyes, grown used now to the light, focussed on a spot a furlong in front of him.

The remembered gorge gashed a rocky hillock at

that point. Masses of earth and stone and a few barrels of concrete and some bright steel bars and a mixing trough for cement littered the opening of the gash. Just behind this, around an aperture in the rock, three or four men were grouped. Some were dressed as laborers; others were in khaki.

Directly in front of these and on a slight eminence of rock, stood a tall and wiry man in riding clothes. He gripped a rifle, from which he was ejecting a shell.

Even at that distance, Barry recognized him as Wolfe Naylor, Drace's lanky secretary. And he shouted hotly to the fellow to put down the gun. As he called, Gale began to run and to slide down the farther side of the ridge, toward the group.

By way of reply, Naylor whipped the rifle to his shoulder again, and took aim. And, from behind him, a new figure stepped out into the open and upon the rock where Naylor stood.

The newcomer was a woman; slender, infinitely graceful, in her snowy afternoon dress. The sunset light glorified her and seemed to envelop her in a shimmering white aura.

Her face was turned toward Barry; and, in the sunset it was transfigured.

Forgetful of his peril, Gale stared in rapt adoration at her. And his panting lips formed the soundless cry of,

"Maida!"

Then, simultaneously, two things happened.

The girl threw out her arm, with a frightened excla-

mation of protest, and struck up the leveled rifle-barrel. And, as she did so, Naylor fired.

This much Barry Gale saw. This much he always remembered. But, that was all he saw or remembered. For his muscular knees turned to tallow. He plunged forward through a sky full of multi-hued shooting stars.

Then everything went black; and he sank for miles down into a cool darkness. After which he slept—or died. He did not know which. Nor did he care.

CHAPTER TWO

GALE awoke with a racking headache and a buzzing of his ears. There was a strong smell of liniment in his nostrils.

For a few moments, he lay still, while thought and memory came back. With no trouble at all he was able to trace the various happenings of the afternoon, up to the point where Naylor had fired and Maida had struck up the barrel of the rifle. Everything since then was a blank.

Presently he opened his eyes. He was lying on a big white bed in a big gray room. Twilight was deepening into dim dusk, through the windows. Gale lifted his hand to his head. His practised fingers encountered there a damp bandage that had evidently been applied by an amateur in such matters; but by a conscientious and deft amateur.

Barry got to his feet, somewhat shakily; and made his way to a wall mirror. Before this glass, in the fading light, he lifted the bandage and examined the hurt it covered. Already, from his sensations and from his surgical knowledge of wounds, he had made a fairly accurate guess as to the extent of his injury. Now, supplementing sight with touch, he muttered, half aloud, as he had been wont to in the olden hospital days:

"Just a superficial abrasion.—Left frontal, an inch above the temple.—Mild case of concussion.—A touch of iodine and a scrap of adhesive would have been enough, without this liniment-soaked turban.—And, now, as the swooning heroine would say,—‘Where am I?’ ”

He moved toward the nearest window. His head still throbbed; but the pain was lessening; and he no longer felt shaky. The bullet, sent wild by Maida Drace's gesture, had struck a rock above Gale, on the ridge, had ricocheted and in passing had kissed the man's forehead. The impact had apparently been severe enough to cause slight concussion of the brain for an hour or so; but had left the skull uninjured. Incidentally, it had left Barry with a keenly healthy curiosity as to what had happened since then and as to where he might now be.

As he neared the window, Gale could see the far-off mountain-wall that girds the Sacramento Valley to eastward; Mount Lassen with its cap of snow and its faint reek of volcanic smoke rising high into the twilight sky from far behind the Tuscan Peaks. Nearer,—perhaps a mile to southward,—Barry could see the blurred line of the ridge he had scaled. Between it and him was flung the jumble of hills and gorges he had seen in the brief instant before the vision of Maida had dazzled him.

Thus, at first glance, he knew he must be in a rear room of Jared Drace's big new stone house. But whether he had been brought hither a prisoner or as

an act of mercy to a wounded trespasser he could not tell.

Directly below the window was a flagged courtyard whose far side was bounded by a nine-foot roughcast wall. A wide gateway pierced this outer wall. And the gate was standing open. Just outside it stood a low-hung motor truck. The radiator of another such truck was visible behind the first.

As Gale was still looking aimlessly down from his second-story window, he saw a man step out into the courtyard, from the house. The man was Wolfe Naylor. The secretary took a step or two into the courtyard, then turned back and spoke. Barry leaned forward, until his face touched the pane. In his heart was a sudden hope that it might be Maida to whom Naylor was speaking.

From his new angle of vision, as he advanced close to the windowpane, he could see that a cellar door of wrought iron, just below him, was open. Out of this subterranean hole was emerging a line of men.

They looked like gnomes, in the uncertain gloaming light. The likeness was the greater, because each and every man in the long single file was bent double by an uncouthly awkward weight of some sort, carried on the shoulders.

Out from the cellar and into the courtyard and across the flagging, crawled the queer, dimly seen procession of hunched-over men in brownish garments; all-but reeling under the heavy and formless burdens they bore.

Wolfe Naylor, in front of them, directed and mar-

shaled the odd line toward the gateway. As the first of the burden-bearers staggered through it, Naylor stood to one side. His sharp eyes ran over the swaying line of men. And,—whether by mere chance or whether attracted by the blur of lighter color against the window pane above him,—he glanced upward.

For the fraction of a second, he stared at Gale; and, in the dusk, his dark face seemed to twist and to grow paler. Then his whole visage blazed into fury. With a snakelike swiftness his right hand sought his hip.

At the same instant, the window shade was jerked downward, and Gale's indistinct view of the court was cut off. As the shade was lowered, the dark room sprang into brilliant light.

Barry whirled around. At his elbow stood a man. One of the newcomer's hands still held the bar of the shade he had lowered. The fingers of the other were just dropping away from the electric light switch, in the wall beside the window.

The man must have come into the room on shoes of silence. The lowering of the shade and the turning on of the light were Gale's first intimation of his presence. The interloper did not speak, nor did he so much as glance in the guest's direction. He passed on to the two other windows, methodically, and pulled down their shades.

Gale's eyes followed him, in a sort of fascination. The fellow was dressed in closefitting and almost clerical black. His hair was sparse and dark; and it was plastered smoothly to his large head. Thus far he

bore, in manner and costume, the aspect of a typical well-trained upper servant.

But after a single glimpse of his pallid face, Barry had no thought for the man's other characteristics. The face was small for so large a head. And it was colorless. The features were inconspicuous,—all but the eyes. These were unusually wide-open. The pupil and iris were entirely covered by a pale grayish film.

A single glance at these widely blank orbs was enough for a man with Gale's long medical training. This servant was blind;—stone blind from birth.

What struck Barry with astonishment was the blind man's unhesitant and direct manner of moving about the room. He did not stumble nor grope, after the manner of the blind. His step was assured.

As he passed by the foot of the bed, on his way to the third window, his hands were hanging limp at his sides. The little finger of his left hand happened to brush lightly against one corner of the damp head-bandage which Gale had taken off and tossed there.

Instantly, at the feather-light touch, the man paused in his progress across the room. Not turning his eyes downward, but with a lightning-quick play of his sensitive long fingers, he located the bandage; lifted and folded it and carried it along with him, as he went to the window. In like manner, as he came to a chair which Gale had shoved a yard or so to one side in reaching the mirror, the first touch of the man's advancing foot against the chairleg told him of its presence in a place where it did not belong. Instantly, he checked his advance, before the touch of his toe could approxi-

mate anything like a kick. Picking up the chair, he restored it to its wonted place; and moved on.

Shifting his interested gaze from the blind man's face, to his feet, Barry saw he was shod in list slippers. Not only did this account for the utter silence of his tread; but it rendered his sensitive pedal nerves conscious at once of any obstacle in their way.

Sketchily, Gale ran over in his mind the tales he had heard of this household's personnel. He recalled the gossip that Naylor and Drace's valet, Sludge, and the Chinaboys were the financier's only indoor employees. And he jumped to a conclusion. The blind man had finished his rounds of the room and was at the door; his hand on the knob.

"You're Sludge, Mr. Drace's valet, aren't you?" asked Barry.

"Yes, sir," answered the man, respectfully; adding, "Is there anything I can do for you, sir?"

"Yes," said Gale "you can tell me how I got here, for one thing; and why I was——"

"I'm sorry, sir," replied Sludge, a faint uneasiness tinging his severely correct manner, "but I am afraid there is nothing I can tell you. I heard you had had an accident and had been brought here; and that Miss Drace had bound up your head and that she said you were not in danger. She took a first aid course, sir, and she knows about such things. She said you were not to be disturbed until you came to yourself. Mr. Drace sent me up here to see if you needed anything and to arrange the shades and the light. That is all I

know about it. Is there anything I can do for you before I go down, sir?"

Gale made no reply. He was gazing foolishly at the bandage in Sludge's hand; and thinking he would have taken it from his head in less contemptuous fashion if he had known Maida's fingers had bound it there. Taking Barry's silence, apparently, for a negative answer to his query of service, Sludge left the room.

Barry stared after him, his brows puckering. Everything here seemed so queer,—so abnormal;—the gnome-like procession of burden-bearers, marshaled by Naylor;—Naylor's homicidal snatching for the pistol on his hip, at sight of the face at the window;—this stone-blind valet, so super-efficient in spite of his affliction;—above all, the primal fact that Wolfe Naylor should have opened fire on him as he stood harmlessly on the ridge-crest above the gash-like little gorge.

None of it made sense, to Gale. Yet it made as much sense as that he should be once more in the same house with Maida Drace. And at the thought he thrilled with eager anticipation of seeing her again. Not more than five minutes had elapsed since his awakening. Yet he felt he had wasted precious time. Everything could wait,—the solution of these odd problems, and all;—everything except the sight of Maida.

He went to the door;—wondering if by any chance it might be locked from the outside. His defiant turn of the knob proved he was not a prisoner. For the well-oiled door swung outward at his first pressure.

Gale found himself in a wide upper hallway with a flight of broad and shallow stairs ahead of him. Cau-

tiously,—for his head still ached and his steps were not yet wholly steady,—he descended these stairs.

In the stone-floored hall, below, a huge hearth-fire crackled. Its flickering light played fitfully on wall-trophies and on the few bits of massive furniture that were scattered through the raftered foyer. It played also on the white dress and sunny hair of a girl who was hurrying in from a rear room, her white little hands full of fresh bandages.

Half way down the stairs, Barry Gale halted, at sight of the advancing girl. She did not see him, until she had set one dainty foot on the lowest stair. He did not speak; but stood, dazed and ridiculously happy, staring down at her.

Then as she began the ascent, she glanced up, and saw him standing above her. With a little cry of surprise, she halted. And for an instant the two faced each other, wordless. It was Maida who broke the brief silence.

“Barry!” she exclaimed, an almost maternal solicitude in her sweet young voice. “You mustn’t be walking around like this! And your bandages have come off, too! I left you not ten minutes ago, to go and look for these other dressings. And here you’ve——! Oh, are you feeling any better? Any better at all?”

“Why, I’m all right, now!” he laughed, to reassure her and to banish from her upturned face the look of worry. “It was only a tap on the head. My head is uncommonly thick, so I’ve been told by most of my friends. And I’m in first rate shape. So it was just

a prolonged knockout ;—nothing worse. As soon as my ears stop singing, I'll be as good as new."

"You should have lain still," she insisted. "I telephoned for the nearest doctor I could find in the book. But he wasn't at home. They promised to send him over here as soon as he gets back. Come here and sit down. You oughtn't to be standing up, when you're——"

"I'm all right," he declared, taking from her grasp the big hall chair she was trying to push toward him. "But it's good to sit down," he added, sinking into the chair's deep cushions as she seated herself on a fire-side bench near him, "because it means we can talk, the way we used to. Do you remember the long confabs we used to have, in front of the hall-fire at the Caringtons'? We——"

He broke off in his retrospective speech. He had not meant to bring back old times or even to hint at them. Yet, at almost his first word, he had blundered into the past. Before he could shift the current of talk, the girl shifted it for him.

"What must you think of us, here?" she was saying, earnestly. "You know what happened to you, don't you? You were shot. And——"

"So I gather," he interposed, drily, "but please don't be distressed about it. If I remember rightly you spoiled Naylor's otherwise flawless aim by knocking his rifle aside as he was drawing trigger. I have you to thank for——"

"Please don't blame Mr. Naylor, too severely," she begged. "It wasn't as bad as it must have seemed.

You see, he thought you were one of the poachers who have been overrunning our place for the past few months. He thinks they are trying to get the lay of the land, to rob the house; or perhaps to steal from some of the storehouses. He is obsessed on that danger. And when he saw you to-day he thought of course,—coming from that direction, and so far from any road or anything,—that you were spying out the land. So he took a rifle from one of the guards and fired twice. Not at you, but over your head, to frighten you off. The poor fellow was terribly cut up when he found how near he had come to killing you.”

“H’m!” mused Gale, recalling the hole in his cap and the steady aim of the gun for the second shot. “Yes,—he must have been terribly cut up. Surely. But when a man has such cute impulsive little ways with a rifle, he must expect a shock now and then. Don’t let’s bother about it, any longer, though. No harm is done. How did you happen to be there? And how did you happen to have me brought here instead of taken home or down to the hospital at Red Bluff?”

“We couldn’t take you to your own home,” she said, “because none of us knew where you live, or whether you live anywhere around this region. I wanted to have you rushed straight to the hospital. But Mr. Naylor examined your head and he saw it was not a dangerous wound. And he wouldn’t take you to Red Bluff. He said people would—gossip.”

“That’s quite possible,” conceded Gale.

“He wanted you tended, there, in the canyon, until you could come to yourself enough to tell us where

you lived. But I made them bring you home here, of course. Mr. Naylor is very efficient and all that. But he doesn't seem to have much sympathy or understanding for people who are in trouble. I've noticed that. The idea of rigging up a shack of boughs, and making a pine needle bed in it, as he suggested we do, and leaving you for one of the guards to look after! It's lucky I happened to be there. I had been for a walk, through such an uncanny, ghostly bit of forest, and over the most impassable ridge! And I had just happened to come out at a point where Mr. Naylor was superintending the work some of the men were doing. I hadn't been there five seconds, when he fired at you. You must have been only a little way behind me. I had stopped to rest for a while on the top of the ridge, of course. But——"

"You say Naylor was terribly cut up, when he found he'd creased me," ventured Gale. "How did he show it? By bitter tears or only by swooning?"

"Not by either of those approved old ways," she confessed. "In fact, he didn't do or say much. But I could see from his face how the accident had shocked him. He——"

"I see," assented Gale. "I know the type. One of these strong, silent men who show no trace of outward emotion,—as long as they're winning."

But he said the last five words in the recesses of his own heart; and he recalled Naylor's expression and the swift reaching toward his pistol, when his eyes had encountered Barry's, from the courtyard.

Barry was frankly puzzled. He could not account

for Naylor's double effort to shoot him, down yonder by the gorge. In view of the course both shots had taken, he knew Naylor had lied in saying he intentionally fired over Gale's head. And assuredly, that reaching for the automatic at his belt, there in the courtyard, had been no accident!

Yet why on earth should the man hate him and yearn to murder him? The two had never exchanged words, nor had they so much as been introduced. They had seen each other perhaps twice, in all.

Naylor, presumably, had not known Gale's name, nor where he lived. Otherwise he probably would have had the injured man carried to his own home. In spite of this, he had tried to kill Barry; and presumably still yearned to kill him. Sane men do not do these things. Yet Naylor, presumably, was sane. Gale gave over the unsolvable problem, and turned to the pleasanter pursuit of listening to Maida. She was saying:

"I couldn't believe it was you. I saw you, for just that flash of time, standing on the ridge. You had changed so much and grown so much more tanned and muscular and—and careworn, this past four or five years! But in that second I recognized you. I—I don't yet know what you are doing out here. Nell Carrington wrote me, ever so long ago, that you'd left Baltimore. But she didn't know where you'd gone. And to think of my finding you, thousands of miles away! I didn't come out here, myself, till last month. But you must have known I was here, didn't you? Why didn't you come over to see me, Barry? I've been so lonely, here, all by myself! Father is busy and

abstracted, all the time. And I don't know any of the people out here. Oh, it's so good to have met you again! Are you in California on a visit or do you live here, now?"

"I live here," he made answer, spreading out his hardened palms for her inspection. "Don't these callouses tell their own story?"

"Your hands don't look like a doctor's, any more," she mused, studying them, her dainty head on one side. "They look so strong and rugged and—efficient and all. Like a farmer's hands. You aren't a farmer, are you?"

"There aren't any farmers in California," he replied with mock solemnity. "There are no farmers west of the Sierras. As soon as a farmer, traveling west, crosses the Divide, he ceases automatically to be a farmer; and becomes a rancher. Every farm, this side of Kansas, is a ranch. Whether it covers half a state or half an acre. No, I'm not a farmer. I'm a rancher. If a cyclone should pick up a Kansas farm and blow it all the way out here, the farm would change in mid-air, into a ranch, the instant it crossed a certain imaginary line. And if a man, from the West, traveling East——"

"You're a rancher?" she queried, with a real interest. "A rancher? And you used to be a doctor! They said you had so much promise, too!"

"My promise was as nothing, to the promises of my dead-beat patients," he made light answer, seeking to skirt a perilous theme. "And at last I grew tired of uncollectable bills; and of pouring medicine of which

I knew little into human systems of which I knew nothing. Mother Earth always pays her bills, in one form or another, to the man who knows how to collect his payments. Medicine is largely guesswork. Farming is an exact science. It is the greatest profession on earth, for the man who brings brain and brawn and enthusiasm to it. It's the profession of the future. And I'm right on the ground, winning the most worthwhile triumphs a man can win. Yes, I'm a farmer. Or, rather, a rancher. And I'm content to stand pat on the job, till doomsday. So much for myself," he finished, glad to have shunted the conversation off the theme of his leaving the East. "Now, how about you? What have you been doing? Have——?"

"Why did you stop coming to see me, there in Baltimore?" she interrupted, suddenly, with the quiet directness he remembered as her strong trait. "Why did you, Barry? Had I done anything to offend you? If I had, wouldn't it have been fairer,—wouldn't it have been kinder,—to tell me what it was and to give me a chance to explain or to say I was sorry? Wouldn't it, Barry?"

Gale sat up straight, and blinked. This mercilessly direct attack swept away his network of words and left him defenceless. For the moment, he could only stare miserably into the level dark eyes that challenged him.

"I felt 'ever so badly about it," she went on, with that same staggering frankness. "Honestly, I did, Barry. Four times I wrote to you, asking you to call. In one of the letters,—the longest of them all, it was,—I asked you to tell me what the matter was; and I said

I was sorry if I had done anything to make you unhappy or to——”

“You wrote me four letters?” he exclaimed, in consternation. “I never got one of them! What must you have thought of me for not answering——?”

“You never got them,” she explained, “because I never sent them. You see, I was only eighteen. And at that remarkable age, Pride is the greatest possession there is. As soon as I’d get one of the letters written, I’d have an acute attack of pride. And into the fire it would go. The letter; not the pride, worse luck. That’s why you never heard from me. But you haven’t answered my question. Why did you stop coming to see me? Did I bore you?”

“You wouldn’t know how to bore anybody, if you tried all day!” he answered, half-roughly. “And you know it. I can’t tell you why I stopped coming to see you, Maida. I want to tell you. I’d rather tell you that than anything else I could tell. But I can’t. That’s all there is to it.”

She was looking at him steadily and intently with the scrutinizing gaze he remembered so well. For a moment she did not speak. Then, dropping the subject as abruptly as she had introduced it, she said:

“I am to stay out here with father for a month more. Perhaps longer than that. I came out because I was homesick for a sight of him. I wanted to come, long ago. But he wouldn’t let me. At last, I picked up and started across the Continent without saying a word to him about it. I telegraphed from Los Angeles. And he had Mr. Naylor meet me at Red Bluff. But—

somehow Father wasn't nearly as glad to see me as I had thought he'd be. He's changed, dreadfully, this past year. He must be having perfectly horrible business worries. But I can't get him to say a word to me about them."

"Why in the world did he ever come to California; I wonder?" asked Gale. "I don't mean for part of the year, but to shut himself up like this? Is his health bad or——?"

"No," she said, "it doesn't seem to be. When he told me he had bought all this land and was building a house, I was ever so glad. I thought we'd have such jolly times. But we haven't. He wouldn't even let me come here with him. It isn't one bit like Father to turn hermit and hide away from people. I can't understand any of it. There's so much, lately, I can't understand at all!"

"There's one thing *I* can't understand," commented Gale, with a touch of natural curiosity. "And that's what he is building or digging, down in that gorge below the ridge. If it's a house, it's in an almost inaccessible location. The same if it's anything else. It——"

"That's what I asked Mr. Naylor, when I stumbled in on them at work there, to-day," said Maida. "He seemed actually annoyed and a little bit flustered, when I walked in on them. I'd never been there before. It's such an out-of-the-way corner. Mr. Naylor said it was a well of some kind they were digging, for irrigation. He'd gotten as far as telling me that, when he caught sight of you. After that, there were more important

things for me to do than to ask him more questions."

"A well,—for irrigation?" repeated Gale, incredulously. "He was guying you. There's no water there. Or if there is, it's tainted with white sulphur, the way it is in those springs at Iron Canyon. And he'd have to dig through half a dozen solid hills of rock to lay his pipes, or his ditches. He——"

"We'll ask Father," said the girl. "I was going to take you into his study, right away. But somehow, we got talking, and I forgot. He ought to be told if the well won't be any use for irrigation. And anyway, it didn't look very much like a well. There were all sorts of queer steel things and steel doors and concrete walls and——"

Crash!

Subconsciously, as Maida was speaking, Barry had noticed the blind valet enter the hall from the rear, on his way to some first floor room. Sludge had been walking with a sure and steady step. Yet, in the middle of Maida's last sentence, the blind man had lurched sideways, almost as though with intent, and had caromed against a six-foot-tall Satsuma vase which stood in an angle of the fireplace.

The vase tumbled to the floor with a most ungodly racket; and brought both Gale and Maida to their feet, on the jump.

With a mumble of contrite apology, Sludge was down on hands and knees amid the myriad fragments, groping for them and collecting as many as he could find into a pile on the hearth. Maida took the mis-

fortune pleasantly; accepting, in a kind word or two, the man's frightened plea for pardon.

Her back had been toward Sludge, when the mishap occurred. But Gale had been facing him. And he could have sworn the thing had not been done by accident.

"Come!" said the girl, turning from the wreck of the vase and from the humbly scrambling figure among the ruins. "Let's go into the study. I want you to meet Father. You're sure you're strong enough to walk?"

They crossed the hall and entered a passageway that led to a lighted room, beyond. As they went, Maida whispered:

"Poor Sludge! It wrung his heart to do that. I really believe it's the first time he ever broke anything, in all the three years he has been with Father. He's blind, you know. But he's miraculously clever in getting about. Father says he is by all odds the best valet he ever had. His predecessor lost his job when Father found him, one day, reading some of the private papers in a strongbox. Father says that's one thing Sludge will never be able to do. He's a treasure."

"I never heard before of a blind valet," observed Gale, absently, his memory still on the odd downfall of the vase.

"Father says Sludge always knows where everything is; and that he never makes a mistake. He does better, Father says, than nine-tenths of the people who have eyes."

As she spoke, she tapped lightly on a door at the

short passage's end. From beyond, a tired, somewhat high-pitched voice called leave to enter. Maida opened the door; and she and Barry passed into a wide and low-ceiled room.

The study was meagerly furnished; and the only light was a single-shaded electric bulb which cast its ray on a heap of blue-prints in a table's center; leaving most of the rest of the room in dense gloom.

At the table, poring over the roll of blueprints, sat a man. On first glance, Gale recognized him, from his newspaper photographs, as Jared Drace. But those photographs had given the impression of an aggressively healthy and somewhat large man in late middle age. The man crouched over the blueprints was wizened and stooping and old. His hair was white. His face had hundreds of lines in it.

His sallow skin sagged, as if much more flesh had once supported it. In the tired old eyes was a brooding and furtive look; behind which a vague terror seemed to smoulder.

So much the first casual glance told Barry, as the shaded light vaguely illuminated his host's face.

"Father," Maida was saying, "this is Mr. Barry Gale. He and I are old friends. I think I told you so, when he was brought here. He is feeling very much better than I dared hope he could. And he understands the shooting was an accident. I've been telling him how sorry we all are."

Drace had been rising slowly, and with apparent effort, from his chair. With stiff courtesy, he held out his flabbily thin right hand to his guest.

"I am sincerely sorry," he said, "to learn of your injury. And I am glad it is not more serious."

As he spoke, he was peering, through the dim light, at the flesh-cut on Gale's forehead. He frowned slightly, and added:

"But really you know, Mr.—Mr.—Gale, is it not?—you know *you* were culpable in the matter, too. It was contributory negligence, and worse. It was flagrant trespass. My grounds are posted. In the *Red Bluff Sentinel* and in the *News* and in the *Redding Searchlight* and in other papers of this and adjacent counties I have advertised that trespass on my estate will be severely punished. By disregarding those notices you laid yourself open to——"

"To sudden death?" queried Gale, nettled by the tone of lofty rebuke. "Hardly, I think. The law against trespass does not make the offense punishable by homicide."

"Pshaw!" fumed Drace. "There was no question of homicide. As my daughter must have explained to you, Naylor fired in the air. His sole motive was to frighten you off."

"If a bullet hole through my cap and a bullet graze on my head are the results of his 'firing in the air,'" suggested Barry, good-naturedly, "then, if it's all the same to you, next time I hope he may fire directly at me. In that case his bullets will only hurt the atmosphere."

"Still," insisted Drace, petulantly, waving aside the mild pleasantry, "still, the fact remains that you were trespassing. By the way," he continued, a note of

veiled worry creeping into the voice which he strove to make elaborately unconcerned, "by the way, what were you doing there? How did you happen to be trespassing on that precise spot? Not that it matters, especially."

Barry Gale was thinking fast. He could not tell this inhospitable old multimillionaire that he had been racing wildly over forbidden ground, spurred on by a crazy yearning to set eyes on Maida again. Compromising with conscience and yet preserving the body of the truth, he pulled out of his pocket the ermine purse which had given him the clue to Maida's presence in the neighborhood.

"I found this lying on the ground, near my boundary line," said he. "I recognized it as a purse that I—that used to belong to Miss Drace. And I——"

"Oh, I see," broke in Drace, with manifest relief in his dry-as-dust tones. "You were on your way here to return it to her? Very kind and—and neighborly of you. I am all the more sorry that Naylor behaved as he did. Yet, surely, you could have sent it back to her by mail, couldn't you?"

Gale had handed the worn little purse to Maida. Their hands and their eyes met, in the exchange. And for the briefest part of an instant, Barry was oblivious to everything about him. Thus, he missed Drace's question. So, for that matter, did Maida. Yet, she was aware of a momentary embarrassing pause. And, womanlike, she began to speak rapidly, on the first subject that came to her mind; in order to bridge the gap.

"Oh, Father," she began, "Mr. Gale is a rancher near here. And he knows all about irrigation. He says that queer well you are having dug, down in the gorge, is no sort of use for irrigating. He says there's no water there, except sulphur water, and that the pipes would have to——"

She paused. Jared Drace had gotten to his feet again. He was shaking all over.

"What are you talking about?" he demanded, harshly.

"Why," returned the girl, surprised at his vehemence, "about that funny looking thing down there in the gorge. I ran across it by chance this afternoon, just before——"

"Oh," interrupted Drace, with a mighty attempt at ease of manner, "that thing? It——"

"Yes," she explained. "What did you suppose I was speaking about? Mr. Gale says it's not a good place to sink a well. He saw it, too. And he says——"

"It isn't a well," said Drace, still steadying his voice with some difficulty. "Who told you it was?"

"Mr. Naylor said so. I asked him and he——"

"Naylor doesn't know anything about it," rapped out Drace, in blustering confusion. "It isn't a well. It's a—a silo pit."

"A silo pit!" echoed Gale, in amazement, as he recalled the appearance and location of the work. "A silo pit, down there;—a mile from your nearest out-building and two miles from the nearest field or——"

"I'm—I'm experimenting on a new theory of ensilage," declared Drace. "A theory of my own. And

I chose an out-of-the-way place for the experiment. A—a place where outsiders wouldn't be likely to hang around and pry into my formulas."

"I see," said Barry, pitying the floundering attempts to lie convincingly; and realizing that, whatever the purpose for the excavation in the gorge might be, it most certainly was not dug for ensilage. Drace went on to elaborate his improvised tale.

"You see," he expounded, "I came out here to indulge my hobby for farming. It had always been a dream of mine to get away far enough, some time, to putter around a big farm and work out my own theories. That's why I bought this tract. That's why I'm here."

"I see," said Barry, again.

Mentally, he was visioning the stretch of arid hills and gorges that made up the wilderness estate; and its contrast with the bloomingly cultivated miles of land that hemmed it in. This and the fact that not one inch of the Drace estate, so far as he had seen or heard of, was under any sort of cultivation. With covert curiosity he eyed the glibly lying financier.

Maida caused a slight and welcome diversion, just as Drace was beginning to discourse still further on the theme.

"You'll stay for dinner, of course, Barry?" she said, rising. "So I'll leave you two farmers,—I mean, ranchers,—to argue over crops and ensilage-sites, while I tell the Chinaboys to have an extra place at the table. You're our very first guest; so I must go and break the

news to them. Their ideas of service are still a bit rudimentary."

She left the room. Drace had not seconded the invitation whose acceptance Maida had seemed to take for granted. In fact the financier was looking frowningly at his unbidden visitor and his thin fingers were fidgeting at the table edge. Barry, noting all this, was seized by a whim of mischief, to tease further this ungracious host of his.

"I'm glad you have come out here to farm," he said, ingratiatingly. "We need men of your means and— and ideas. My own little ranch is just south of your place. I'd be glad if you'd drop in for a look at it, some day. And I'll be still gladder if you'll take me for an inspection tour of your own crops. I'm a lot interested in what you were saying about experiments. That silo-pit, down in the gorge, for instance. I noticed there was quite a lot of structural steel used in making it. And what was the idea of the six-inch steel door I caught a glimpse of? Not that it's any of my business, of course," he added apologetically, "but everything pertaining to new things in my own profession interests me. I must surely tell the County Agent about that silo scheme of yours, next time I see him. I know he will be delighted to come over and inspect it. He'll probably embody a description of it in his next report to the government, too. So——"

He ceased; in sheer pity for the harassed man before him. Drace was glaring at him like a cornered animal. The old man's face was stricken and livid. At the

suggestion of a governmental report, his jaw sagged and his tired, bloodshot eyes bulged.

Drace cleared his throat twice; then managed to speak.

"I hope you will not consider me discourteous," he began, choosing his words with labored care. "But one of my objects in coming to California was to be alone and to avoid all needless contact with my fellow-men. I—I had had a severe nervous breakdown. My doctor prescribed such a life as I am now living. A life apart from all social duties. It—it is benefitting me. I do not wish to have that benefit curtailed or impeded. Thus, I must ask that you do not bring my experiments to the notice of anybody. I—I cannot have my estate overrun by inquisitive outsiders. I cannot have my rest-cure broken in on. Please understand that. And please respect an elderly invalid's wish for complete privacy. As I say, I do not intend to be discourteous. But——"

"Why, certainly!" agreed Barry, a twinge of sympathy for the old man's evident distress blurring for the moment his own very natural curiosity. "Please believe that I would not willingly do anything to distress you, Mr. Drace. I spoke without thinking. You see, we Northern Californians are a chummy lot; and we are hospitable, to a fault. Indeed, even in Virginia, I have never known such perfect hospitality as here. Every one seems eager to do all he can for the stranger at his gates; and to share with him not only the last scrap of food, but any bit of farming information that may be of use. That's why I fancied you might be

willing to share with us the results of your experiments and——”

The study door was flung wide. Wolfe Naylor strode in; slamming shut the door after him. Up to the table he hurried; where Drace was sitting huddled low in his big desk chair. Barry had seated himself on a window bench, some yards distant. Thus, he was wholly outside the faint and narrow radius of light from the single incandescent bulb.

“I’d have been back sooner,” began Naylor, excitedly, speaking as he advanced into the room, “but I didn’t dare leave them alone with it. That pest, Gale, was spying on us from a window. He knows too much. And he suspects too much more. It won’t do to let him out of here. You should have let me have my way, in the first place. I’m going up there now. Miss Drace needn’t know. No one will know! He’ll just disappear; that’s all.”

CHAPTER THREE

JARED DRACE'S wild efforts to catch his attention, and to silence his furious outbursts, went unnoted by Naylor. Not till Barry himself strode from his seat in the dark window recess and out into the glow of light, did the secretary check himself.

Then, staring aghast at the unexpected apparition, he stood, for an instant, dumbfounded.

"You were speaking of me, weren't you?" asked Gale, evenly, as he confronted Naylor.

Barry spoke without heat. Yet his eyes were ablaze. In his brain a fierce and wholesome rage was awakened. This man had tried to kill him,—a stranger,—and now in cold blood, hours later, was again planning to put him out of the way. It was more than Gale's usually calm temper could carry.

"I think," he went on, edging closer to the astounded Naylor, "I think you just said I was not to get away from here alive, didn't you? And weren't you asking leave to do the job? Well, here I am. You're saved a trip upstairs."

"Mr. Gale!" quavered Drace, placatingly, "you will pardon me if I say you would better go. If you wish, I will have one of the cars take you home. Naylor, I left some letters in my bedroom I wish you would go and get them for me. They are on the——"

"Pardon me, Mr. Drace," interposed Gale, "but this

matter can't wait. Naylor, you tried to kill me, to-day. Later, you put your hand to that pistol at your hip, when you saw me. Just now, you spoke again of wanting to kill me. All that is not on the free list. We've come to a showdown, you and I. What is your grudge against me?"

"The grudge I'd have against any man who sneaks and spies on us here!" retorted Naylor, momentary astonishment swept aside by a flurry of rage. "I'd shoot such spying trespassers as readily as I'd shoot a skunk or any other vermin."

"I'm not 'spying,' as you call it, on any one!" blazed Gale. "You and Mr. Drace best know whether or not you have anything that needs hiding. But whatever it is, it doesn't interest me. I am here, because you shot me. You may thank your stars you're not spending the night in the white stone jail, down at Red Bluff! I am going to continue coming here, as often as I please; until some one with more authority than a murder-mad secretary forbids me to. Please understand that, very clearly. Now, we'll come back to the subject of putting me out of the way. Here I am. What are you going to do about it?"

His tone was as insulting as a kick. Naylor,—perhaps in empty bluster or from force of habit,—reached convulsively for the automatic pistol he still carried at his belt. In the same instant, Barry darted forward and caught his pistol hand by the wrist.

As the weapon leaped from its holster, Gale threw all the muscular power of his stocky body into a scientifically forceful wrench of Naylor's imprisoned wrist.

Unprepared for such attack, Naylor had not time to brace himself. He cried out with pain as the wrist turned sharply backward.

The pistol clattered to the hardwood floor. By the time it touched ground, Barry had dropped Naylor's right wrist and had stooped swiftly to pick up the fallen gun. Thus, through no skill of his own he missed a ferocious left-hand swing which the secretary aimed at his head. Over Gale's stooping body the blow whizzed. Drace, at the instant, threw himself forward and caught Naylor's arm; interposing his wizened body between the two antagonists.

Gale picked up the pistol and slipped it into his own pocket.

"I never have toted one of these things," he remarked, cheerfully, "but it's less likely to do damage in my possession than in yours. If you want it again, you can come over to my ranch for it. And——"

"Go, Mr. Gale!" exhorted Drace, struggling with the cursingly raging secretary. "Please go, now. I'm sorry this has happened. Naylor has acted only through zeal for my welfare. Please go."

"Certainly," assented Barry, adding: "I couldn't very well do anything else after what's happened. It would hardly be pleasant, I suppose, to sit down to dinner with one man who has tried to kill me and with another who abets the matter and orders me out of his house. Good-night."

He left the room; glancing back for a last view of the old financier and of the fuming Naylor, who was still muttering and struggling to get free.

"Don't worry, Mr. Drace!" Gale called over his shoulder. "He won't break away. He's not trying to, as hard as he can. You see, he knows I have his gun. And a gun-fighter is never anxious for a barehands scrap. Good-night."

In the outer hall, Barry met Maida, who was returning from the kitchen wing of the house.

"I've just remembered that I haven't given any directions to the men for to-morrow," he hailed her. "They'd all be asleep by the time I could get back home from dining here. So I must go. I'm sorry. I——"

"But surely you could telephone them or to your superintendent," she suggested, in frank disappointment. "Can't you?"

"I'm my own superintendent and foreman and overseer," he made answer. "And our only telephone is in the ranch house itself. The men are in the bunkhouse, by now."

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" she exclaimed.

Glancing back, he saw the study door was still open, The buzz of voices had sunk to silence in there. Barry knew the two men were listening. And once more an imp of reckless mischief entered his brain.

"Have you a saddle horse, here?" he asked Maida, raising his voice a little and speaking with much distinctness. "If you have, and if you've nothing better to do to-morrow morning, can't I come over at about ten and take you for a cross-country ride? Please say yes! I want to show you my sample-size ranch. And," with a further raising of the voice, "on the way back we can stop for a good, careful look at that wonderful

silos pit of your father's, down in the gorge. How about it?"

"I'd love to!" she cried, happily. "There's a dear of a range horse here that I've been breaking to the saddle. Promptly at ten? I'll be ready."

From the study came the muffled explosion of a full-flavored oath. Barry hoped Maida might not have heard it.

During the long walk home, Gale's mind wavered between his illogical joy at having met his oldtime sweetheart again; and a bewildered throng of conjectures as to the odd mystery he had stumbled upon.

Hitherto, he had felt scant interest in the neighborhood guesses as to Jared Drace's life in California. Now, all at once, he found he had enrolled himself eagerly in the guessing contest.

Why, in the first place, had Drace left his lifelong home in the East and come out here to bury himself in a lonely big house on a lonely big wilderness estate? The man had not fallen foul of the law. He was not in hiding. For the newspapers, both East and West, had mentioned his coming to Tehama County and his new home there. Nor were his gigantic financial deals of a kind to set the law on his track.

In the East,—as Gale knew from the newspapers and from things told him long ago by Maida,—Drace had not led in any way a hermit life. He had had a hundred interests and had been more or less a public character. His social life had been broad and active. Yet here he lived as a recluse. The yarn about doctors'

orders for seclusion and of a "rest cure," did not fool this ex-doctor, at all.

What was Jared Drace doing? He was doing something;—something in which Wolfe Naylor was his zealous lieutenant;—something which not only was making him old and a nervous wreck and giving his eyes a haunted look, but that called for lies and for stark secrecy.

For example,—that "silo pit" with its structural steel and its tons of Oriental cement and its massive safe-deposit-vault door! What was that thing, anyhow? Drace could not possibly be doing any sort of mining. This particular belt of Tehama County had never been rich in gold. And a man of Drace's wealth would not be doing any hole-and-corner gold-mining, under strict secrecy.

In fact, Barry recalled reading, a year or two before,—as his love for Maida had always made him read, avidly, any press mention of her or of her father,—that Drace had been one of the world's largest individual buyers of gold, during a flurry in Wall Street. A man does not purchase gold by the million dollars worth, in open market and through agents, and then sink a mine-shaft in an unpromising corner of an unpromising mining county for such few dollars' worth of it as he may or may not be able to exhume.

No, the whole thing was a mystery. And Gale was certain that its solution was as unknown to Maida as to himself. He ceased to tire his aching head by trying further to solve the problem. And his thoughts surged back to Maida.

The girl was as far away from him as ever. She must always be so. It was madness for him to seek a renewal of the sweetly perilous friendship he had so wisely broken off, years before. He was only laying up sorrow for himself. He knew that.

Yet, with the fatuous self-deception of love, he told himself it would be cowardly in him to keep away from the house where he had been threatened. He would show his lack of fear and his self-respect by going there openly and often and without regard for danger. Which line of reasoning showed, if nothing else, to what straits of idiocy and self-deception a virulent case of love can lure an otherwise sane man.

Oddly enough, during that homeward walk, Barry troubled himself little as to Naylor's mysterious hatred for himself and the secretary's unprovoked attacks on him. Once, the unaccustomed pressure of the heavy automatic in his pocket reminded him of his fiercely brief encounter for its possession. And, in disgust, he pulled the weapon from its resting place and tossed it into a clump of manzanitas, some hundred feet up the hillside from the road.

He resolved to say nothing to his cousin, and partner, Dick O'Rell, about his adventure; but to attribute his abraded forehead to a tumble among the rocks; and to mention casually that he had met Maida Drace, who was an old acquaintance of the Baltimore days.

He knew O'Rell's innate excitability and the man's devoted loyalty to him. The tale of the attempted killing would be quite enough to send Dick rushing across to the Drace house, bare-handed, to thrash the

secretary, or to stand the whole household on its head.

O'Rell, too, had all the venturesome curiosity of a schoolboy. Once let him get an inkling of mystery, and he was quite capable of going to the alleged "silo pit" and exploring it until a bullet should cut short his investigations. Wherefore, Barry resolved to hold his peace.

He was saved the trouble of any involved explanations. For, as he entered the ranch house dooryard and started up the path to the porch, Dick O'Rell heard his step and came hastening out to meet him; with the collie, Roy, gamboling in eager welcome, ahead of the man.

"Come on in here!" exhorted Dick, dragging Barry into the house. "I've got the grandest scheme that ever came down the pike. It's a reg'lar ol' he-one! I've been fidgeting for an hour, waiting for you to come home, so I could tell you about it."

"If it's that wild-eyed plan of yours, again, to plant a grove of sugar maples instead of a walnut orchard," began Gale, "I tell you for the tenth time, there's nothing in it. Out here, they'd never——"

"Sugar maples?" snorted O'Rell, in fine scorn. "Sugar-fiddlesticks! This time it's the real thing I've got hold of. It's—it's GOLD!"

He had been leading the way into the littered living room; fishing a crumpled newspaper out of his pocket as he went. Now, turning on the puzzled Gale, he demanded:

"Ever hear of the Ruggles brothers?"

"Yes," assented Barry, with a show of much patience. "I have. And I've heard of Peter Lassen. And I've heard of Commodore Stockton and John C. Fremont. If there is any one in this section of California who hasn't heard of the Ruggles brothers, I'd like to have a picture of him. If you're going to rake up the old yarn of their lost treasure, suppose you wait till I've had supper?"

"Listen to this!" ordered Dick. "It's in to-day's *Sentinel*. I didn't have a chance to look at our copy till I got back from work. If I had, I'd have started on the hunt, right away; without waiting for you or for to-morrow morning. I'll read the whole thing. It isn't very long. Listen:"

Clearing his voice, he spread out the newspaper and began to read; his throat contracting with excitement:

"Memories of the famous Ruggles holdup were revived in a peculiar way by a post mortem statement made by Joshua Z. ('Curly') Enright, who died in Red Bluff Hospital late last night.

"Most of our readers are familiar with the story of the three brothers, Ruggles, of Fresno, who robbed the mine stage of more than \$50,000 in gold bullion, at Robbers' Rock, above Middle Creek, in the early Nineties. It will be recalled that these three brothers shot and wounded John Boyce (later sheriff of Trinity County) the express messenger; and looted the bullion. In less than two hours, a posse captured the trio and they were hanged to a pine tree in the city of Redding.

"The bullion which they stole has never been found.

This is the more extraordinary as all three men were captured so soon; implying thus that the gold must have been hidden within a very few miles of the robbery's site. Goldseekers, for the past thirty years, have scoured the hilly country in that vicinity in a vain search for the treasure.

"According to the statement made by Enright, on his deathbed, the Ruggles brothers had two confederates in the crime. These were Enright himself and the late 'Bud' Tremaine. To Enright and Tremaine was assigned the task of hiding the loot; while the three actual robbers were to make a false trail to northward. It was arranged that the five were to meet and divide the gold, as soon as it should be safe to do so.

"According to Enright, he and Tremaine brought the bullion down into Tehama County, in a wagon covered with hay. Carrying it to a rocky hill, which Enright refused to designate, Enright stood guard while Tremaine made a number of journeys up the hill and carried the gold thither to a cache which he told Enright he had dug for the purpose, the preceding week. Then the two separated. Next day, Enright read of the Ruggles brothers' hanging. On the same day, Tremaine, who had gone north to Shasta Village, was shot and killed in a brawl at the infamous old Newman saloon there.

"Enright, according to his confession, was thus left sole possessor of the secret and of the gold. But, seemingly, that is all the good it did him. For, search as he might, from one end of the hill to the other, he was never able to locate the cache. A reporter——"

A laugh from the skeptical Barry broke in on the thrilled reading. O'Rell broke off in vexation.

"And that's what you call a 'discovery,' is it?" scoffed Gale. "Werlhof's account in the *Sentinel* says here that Enright 'refused to designate' the rocky hill where the treasure was buried. And, if you'll shut your eyes and visualize the looks of Tehama County, you'll see that, a very few miles north of Red Bluff, the Sacramento Valley breaks up into something like five hundred hills and hillocks and knolls. The treasure may be buried in any one of them. Or—more likely—the whole thing may be a fake. Curly Enright was hardly more than half-witted. And he was the most egregious old liar and practical joker in Tehama County, you know. And——"

"A man doesn't generally think up unnecessary lies or try to spring jokes, when he's dying," argued O'Rell, annoyed by his cousin's refusal to join in his enthusiasm.

"Granting he told the truth,—for once," argued Gale, "where does it lead to? There are more hills of various sizes in northern Tehama County than there are people of any sizes at all. It'd take a thousand men a thousand years to explore them all for caches. Wake up, Dick! You are in a golden dream."

"Sometimes," mused Dick, plaintively, "sometimes I think you take me for a fool. And then at other times I *know* you do. Did you suppose I let myself get all het up over this thing, just on the face of what I've read you? Use your memory, old man! What was the standing joke we had, the first year we were out

here? The joke about the living ghost who haunted Gopher Hill, up in the north corner of our own ranch? Hey? Remember that? Remember we couldn't go past that hill without seeing old Curly Enright prowling somewhere around it? Remember he wanted to buy it of us; and couldn't, because all his money was in his mind? Have you clean forgotten all that?"

Barry Gale stared at him, in dumb amaze, for a moment. Then he said, dazedly:

"Good Lord! I—I remember! And I remember when we were joking about it, down at the Farm Bureau, Vilas said that hill had been a favorite stamping ground of Enright's for years and years. They thought at first he was prospecting there. They——"

"He was," said O'Rell, in triumph. "He was prospecting for fifty-odd thousand dollars' worth of bullion, cached somewhere within his reach. The poor old purblind, half cracked fellow was looking for the plunder,—the gold his accomplice, Tremaine, cached so cleverly. *Now*, do you wonder I'm interested?"

Barry Gale felt his own steady nerves tingle. The mystic spell of gold was touching him; as it has touched millions of Californians since the far distant day when a ne'er-do-well Jerseyman named Marshall started the mad westward treasure-stampede, by his chance discovery of yellow metal on Sutter's land.

Yet, in revolt at his own excitement, Gale sought to pooh-pooh his partner's idea.

"It's too far-fetched," he urged. "In the first place, there never was a big gold robbery that didn't bring out a score of lying stories of the treasure's where-

abouts. While I don't like to speak ill of a man who's dead, yet we both know Curly Enright was queer in the brain. And we know he never spoke the truth when a lie could serve; and that he had a mania for practical jokes. (Remember the time he started that fake diamond stampede by saying he had found a bed of blue clay out on the east side of Tuscan Peaks?) Depend on it, the whole thing is a hoax. As for his prowling around Gopher Hill——"

"Well?" prompted O'Rell, as Barry hesitated. "As to his prowling around Gopher Hill ? Go on."

"It's all a fake!" growled Barry. "Forget it. The discovery of gold in California cost the country at large more than it brought in. It swamped thousands of men and smashed thousands of homes. California is the Golden State, all right. But its gold lies in the wonder-crops its valleys raise and in the wealth the rich ground is waiting always to give to the man who has the energy and sense to work for it. And the pluck and the brain of its people have brought untold riches to their State. But not in the shape of gold ore. It wasn't till Californians at large stopped mining and turned to their wonderful soil for support that they and their State became the envy of the rest of the world. Look up north in the mining country, for instance. The smelting fumes have turned the green Shasta County hills into deserts. For every successful bit of dredging and smelting, there are a dozen poor fanatics still slaving away with pan and pick, up yonder, at less than day-wages, in the crazy hope that some day they'll strike it rich. Then look at the rest

of the State,—at the places where the gold fever hasn't turned life upside down. Health and progress and green hills and fertile valleys and prosperous busy people. No, California's gold is in her soil and in her sons. Not in her creekbeds and mines. It——"

"That's one grand little sermon," observed Dick, understanding clearly his cousin's elaborate ruse for changing the subject and for banking his own smouldering thrill. "A first rate sermon, Barry, my boy. But you're begging the question. The question being: Are you with me in this gold hunt, or aren't you? I'm starting at daybreak, to-morrow, for Gopher Hill. I'm going to quarter that hill, methodically; a certain area of it every day. I'm going to steal two hours a day for the hunt, till I locate that cache. I may blunder on it the very first day. I may not find it for nearly a month. But find it I'm going to. That's settled. Of course, when it's found, you'll be declared in on the find; at fifty-fifty. For it's your land as much as mine. And I'll be taking time from the work we're both supposed to be doing. But, perhaps you'd like to do your share of the hunting? It'll shorten the job, for one thing. And, besides, it'll be more fun than a dogfight. *'Two good men on the Ruggles' treasure chest! Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of unfermented grape juice!'*" he chanted, breaking off to ask again: "Are you with me?"

"No," said Barry, with unusual sharpness, in order to quell his own yearning for the venture, "I'm not. And if you're wise, you'll remember this is one of the busiest months of the whole year. You'll stick to the ranch work and forget Curly Enright's last joke."

"I'll work overtime, later, to make up for it," promised O'Rell. "But that fifty-odd thousand dollars sounds mighty sweet and soft, to me. And when we've gotten the private tip that it's right at our very door,—well, it'd be a crime to pass up such a chance. And I'm no criminal. I'm after that bullion. Why don't you make it a two-handed game, Barry?" he coaxed. "Come ahead, like a good little sport!"

"Because," said Gale, with ponderous sarcasm, "there's an orange grove here;—and a flourishing rice-paddy;—and a barley crop sowed with Sale's own variety of Experiment Station seed;—and a couple of thousand sheep;—and a few other trifling details;—and a few overpaid laborers to get at least the minimum of work out of. If I've any time left, when I've attended to those minor details, I'll teach myself to knit or start a guessing contest or take a correspondence course in How to Tell the Wildflowers from the Birds;—or do something else that is more useful than hunting for gold where there isn't any. There's a good deal more than fifty thousand dollars' worth of gold on this ranch of ours, Dick. But it's in the form of crops and sheep. Not in ore or bullion."

"Which brings us back to the sermon again," said O'Rell, cheerily, "and is a kindly rebuke to your frivolous goldseeking partner. Suppose we let it go at that, for the present; and chase in and eat? Chang had supper ready half an hour before you got home. I want to get to bed early, because I'm due on Gopher Hill at daylight."

They tramped into the dining room; Roy at their

heels. Chang, the Chinaboy, who was their house-servant and general handy man, was fidgeting at their delay. Chang took his culinary work seriously; and felt any lateness to meals a personal affront to his cooking.

Not until the cousins were alone together in the living room after the evening meal, did O'Rell touch again on the theme so near his heart. Throughout supper, the two had chatted on indifferent subjects. Dick, noting the scratch on Barry's forehead, had asked its cause and had been told the prepared story of a fall among the rocks,—a story which Barry's barked palms and dusty clothing bore out. The tumble down the side of the ridge had bruised him and taken the well-groomed look from his suit.

Gale had also made casual mention of his meeting with Jared Drace's daughter and of having known her in Baltimore and of having called on her that afternoon. He was a wretchedly bad actor. Yet so immersed was Dick in dreams of gold that the haltingly confused tale passed muster.

Now, in the living room, O'Rell returned to the charge.

"You've had a good supper," he began, "and you're rested up from the day. So maybe you see things less crookedly than you did. How about it? How about a little treasure-whirl with me, to-morrow morning?"

"Nothing doing," refused Gale. "I've got a pretty full day, to-morrow."

He was aware of a twinge of guilt, as he remembered that he proposed to spend two or three hours of that

"pretty full day" in riding with Maida Drace. Dick mistook his hesitation for wavering; and pressed the question.

"You can spare the time, all right, all right!" he declared. "We both work too hard. A treasure-hunt will rest us up. Come along!"

"No, thanks," said Gale. "We've been all over that. Except," as an afterthought, "that I want to remind you of one thing; Gopher Hill rises just against the Drace boundary line; and it's next to the wildest part of the Drace land;—out near that queer little gorge of his. Be careful you don't take a short cut across the Drace woods-corner. If you do, one of his nobly efficient guards is liable to take a pot shot at you. I heard to-day that one of Drace's men actually shot twice at a trespasser. Keep well on our own side of the line."

"We aren't living in the Forties!" laughed Dick. "In this century, people don't shoot innocent trespassers; by daylight. Certainly, not in hospitable California. Some one must have been stringing you about a Drace guard shooting twice at a trespasser. Probably some one happened to be passing through the Drace tract and heard a couple of blasts. Or even a couple of rifle shots. (I heard two shots, myself, this afternoon, a long way off. They were most likely shooting at a mark.) And the trespasser got cold feet and imagined he was fired at. That's how such fool stories start."

"Perhaps so," agreed Gale, stroking gingerly the

abrasion on his forehead. "But it won't do you any harm to keep on our own land."

"H'm!" commented Dick. "I begin to see things. You say you 'happened' to meet Miss Drace this afternoon. I wonder if you 'happened' to meet her, while you were straying on her dad's land. And I wonder if you want to keep me off that land, for fear I may meet her, too. I'd hate to think you're selfish, Barry, my son. If you are, you must be punished. You can't expect to keep every pretty girl all to yourself. Just to show you the penalty for selfishness, maybe I'll take a bit of a walk over the line, myself, after my treasure-stint is done for the day."

"There's something else you haven't taken into account," said Barry, ignoring his cousin's elephantine attempts at archness and inwardly praying that O'Rell might not be rash enough to cross the line near the gorge. "You forget this bullion is not yours, even if you find it."

"Why the blue blazes won't it be mine?" challenged O'Rell. "Whose will it be, but yours and mine?"

"It'll belong to the people who were sending the bullion down to the assay office at Redding, back in the Nineties, when the Ruggles gang looted the stage," decreed Gale. "It was stolen from them. If by any fluke you were to find it, you'd have to turn it over to them."

"Why'd I have to?" demanded O'Rell, truculently. "Who could make me do it?"

"Only one man on earth could make you do it, Dick. But that one man would make you do it, the very

instant you got hold of the gold. He'd make you restore every ounce of it to the men it belonged to."

"And that one all-potent and righteous man is Barry Gale, Esquire, I suppose?" sneered Dick.

"No," corrected Gale, "that one man is a certain hot-headed and feeble-minded but gorgeously square youth named Dick O'Rell."

Dick grinned, ruefully.

"Maybe you're right," he admitted, grudgingly, "but I hate to think so. I'll find the bullion, anyway. After that, it'll be time enough for me to blackjack Dick O'Rell's diseased conscience. If worst comes to worst, the mine people ought to go at least fifty-fifty with us on it. Think of all the years it's been on our land! We could charge them storage or corkage or something on it, per year; over and above the reward they offered at the time. And compound interest on the reward, too. Oh, we'll sting 'em, good and plenty! I'm going to turn in. Good night, old man! If you change your mind, you'll know where to find me in the morning. I may even take the whole day off,—just for the first day, you know,—for my treasure hunt. Good night, Barry!"

So full of anticipation was Dick that Gale had not the heart to remind him that they had set aside this evening, some days ago, for the going over of their quarterly ranch figures and the balancing of their account which Barry had that day brought home from the Red Bluff bank. It was to have been an evening of figuring and of budget-making;—always an ordeal to both of the non-mathematical ranchers.

But Gale realized that his partner was in no frame of mind to bend his volatile brain to the task of computations and bookkeeping; even if he had not needed a long night's sleep to freshen him for the morrow's wild goose chase.

So Barry resignedly got out the various ledgers and account books of the ranch and sat down to tackle the dual job alone. He was dead tired; and he ached in every joint; and his head was throbbing. Moreover, his thoughts had an annoying way of straying from the ledgers to Maida Drace.

Altogether, he made slow and laborious work of the accounts. Hour after hour he moiled over them; until his mind was wellnigh a blank and he began to nod from sheer drowsiness.

The living room lamp was beginning to burn low. In Barry's own bedroom, was a new-filled lamp. This bedroom adjoined the living room; and its only door opened out into this latter apartment. Thus, to reach his own room, from the hallway outside, Gale must always pass through the living room.

Blinking sleepily, now, he looked up from his work, and eyed the slowly expiring lamp. He wanted to go to bed. He felt he ought to finish those miserable accounts. As he sat irresolute, his gaze once more on the columns of figures, Roy settled the problem for him.

The collie had been sprawling asleep on the floor beside his master's chair. For hours he had lain thus. Once or twice, through the long evening,—the last time as the mantel clock had tinkled midnight, a few minutes earlier,—the dog had half raised himself and had

tapped with his long muzzle against Barry's elbow, in token that he was lonely and wanted to be spoken to or petted.

At such times Gale had dropped his hand absently on the collie's silken head with a word of careless friendliness and had gone on with his work. The dog, satisfied, had slumped back into the bourne of dreamland; whence, presently, would issue a series of growls and muffled barks and convulsive kicks; as Roy pursued through dreamland's aisles an army of jack-rabbits or ground squirrels that refused to be caught. Dogs and humans are the only creatures that dream. And Roy was an inveterate and vociferous dreamer.

But, for the past minute or so, he had been slumbering dreamlessly and without sound or motion. And the only noise that had broken the midnight silence was the low sputter of the dying lamp. This and an occasional pen-scratch as Barry jotted down a figure or a word.

Suddenly, without warning, the collie was on his feet; a half-born growl merging into a thunderous bark. Every hair bristling, he flew at the window, six feet beyond Gale's desk.

Startled by his dog's fierce vehemence, Barry jumped up. Following the direction of the collie's leap, his glance rested on the window. It was open; but its solid wooden shutters had been closed, to keep out moths and other night insects such as might otherwise have been attracted by the light.

Now, as Barry stared at it, in the uncertain flicker

of the dim lamp, he saw distinctly that one of the shutters had been swung noiselessly open.

At least it had been opened too softly for its sound to reach his own abstracted senses. But the faint opening of the shutter had reached Roy's acute hearing; even through the clogging mists of sleep. That and the unaccustomed scent of whomsoever had done the opening of it.

Even as Gale stared,—and before the dog could get around the table and into the open space in front of it, the wooden flap swung swiftly shut. It closed with a sharp rasp. And, almost at once a second rasp sounded, outside, as though the shutter had been struck softly after it was closed.

In that tiny fraction of a split second, while the blind had flown shut, something against a background of outside darkness had photographed itself on the retina of Gale's keen eyes.

He had seen, in that incredibly quick atom of time, a blurred splash of face, dimly shown by the lamp;—a face whose details in general he could not grasp. He could not have sworn whether the thing had a nose or mouth or whether it belonged to a white man or a mulatto.

But of one detail he was certain. One salient part of the face had been vividly distinct. The lamplight had revealed in the faint blur a pair of eyes, which reflected back its feeble rays with intense clearness.

It was these eyes that Gale had seen with such amazing clearness and which had stamped themselves indelibly on his mind.

The eyes were unusually large. They were black, and as luminous as the eyes of a wild beast. But, in their gleaming depths there had shone a human intelligence, and a strange, unearthly expression which had sent a cold shiver down the stolid rancher's spine.

They were such eyes as he never before had looked into; and such as he knew he would shrink from looking into again. There was a concentrated evil—an unnatural malice,—in them that sickened him.

All this registered itself subconsciously on Barry's mind in the instant that it took him to vault over the table and spring to the window. Quick as he was, the furious collie was there ahead of him; snarling in fierce menace, rearing his furry body aloft and tearing with impotent forepaws at the closed shutter.

Pushing aside the raging dog, Barry caught the shutter fastenings in both hands and thrust with all his might to open them. The shutters moved for perhaps an inch, in response to his shove. Then they stuck.

Something stronger than Gale was holding them shut from outside.

The man wasted one more quarter-minute in wrestling with the non-movable blinds. And, as he wrought,—with Roy leaping and growling murderously at his side,—he caught himself, by an odd trick of mind, casting about in his memory to locate those briefly-visioned eyes. He knew he had never before seen them or their like. Assuredly, they belonged to no human face he had ever beheld. Yet they were human eyes. Not the eyes of a beast. Rather, such eyes as a human might have had in witchcraft days,—

a human who had sold himself body and soul to Satan and in whose eyes lurked a reflection of the fires of the Pit.

With a final wrench at the window-shutters, Barry abandoned the fruitless task.

Turning, and shouting to Roy to follow, he rushed toward the door of the room. This door led into the short entry hall and was not ten feet from the front porch. It ought not to be the work of more than a few seconds at most for Barry and the dog to reach the front steps and then the side yard where hid the man who had peered in on him.

In the midst of his indignant resolve to catch and punish the Peeping Tom, Gale felt again that queer dread of encountering those unearthly eyes. For once in his plucky life he knew something akin to fear.

Driving the unwonted impulse from him, and aflame with anger that anything or anybody should have been able to make him even momentarily afraid, Barry crossed the room in two strides, and turned the knob of the door.

As he turned it he pushed hard. Such momentum, ordinarily, would have sent the door flying open as if from the jar of an explosion; and would have driven the outer knob into the plaster of the hallway's wall.

But now the violent push had no effect, except to bark Gale's knuckles on the panel as his fingers were shoved by their own momentum from the slippery knob.

Something—something heavy and soft and seemingly immovable—was holding the door shut by pressing against it from the far side!

Barry Gale had a weird sense of being trapped by invisible creatures which were barring the room's sole outlets and holding him prisoner. Again came the creepy memory of the briefly-glimpsed eyes out yonder in the darkness. And again, by sheer pluck and anger, Barry put the horror from him.

Gathering himself together, he hurled his wrath-driven compact hundred-and-eighty pounds of muscular weight full against the resisting door.

As he did so, the empty lamp flickered tremblingly and then went out.

Through the black darkness, Gale dashed himself headlong against the door-panels.

CHAPTER FOUR

TO find a window and a door mysterious'y barred against one's egress is an annoying sensation, even in broad daylight. At dead of night, there is something eerie about it.

To combat this vexing sense of the supernatural, Barry put fierceness as well as weight and strength into the plunge wherewith he hurled his powerful body at the door a second time.

The impact sent the panels to splintering. It flung the door itself wide open and sent Gale catapulting out into the hallway. The pressure holding the door shut had been removed.

Out into the half-lit hall spun Barry Gale, unable to check his own momentum. But something checked it for him.

This "something" was the gigantic and uncouth body of a man, who had rolled from his resting place across the doorsill, at Barry's first shove and who now was rising clumsily to his feet.

Into the rising man caromed Gale's flying head and shoulders. The force of the collision sent both men rolling to the floor, with a crash that shook the house.

Barry did not pause to investigate. Here at last was something solid and tangible;—not a phantomlike creature with uncanny eyes,—a creature that swung open shutters and peered in and then vanished. This

new opponent was gratifyingly normal to the touch.

And Barry pitched into him with a murderous zest.

The giant did not resist. All he did was to mutter confused protests and seek to fend off with his huge hands the shower of blows Barry was raining on him.

Roused by the din, O'Rell came running out of his bedroom, flashlight in hand. The sword of white light smote upon the giant's face. Barry desisted from his wild assault and drew back, in stupid astonishment.

"Toni!" he stammered.

The Basco herder got dazedly to his feet, nursing an ensanguined nose with one hand, while he tested a loosened tooth with the other. Above his hamlike hands he gazed on the dumbfounded Barry in sad reproach.

"What in blue blazes is the row?" queried Dick O'Rell.

"Some one was peeping in at me," explained Gale, lamely. "I jumped for the window. He closed the shutter in my face and somehow fastened it shut. I made for the door. There was a weight against it. I pushed my way out and fell over Toni. I didn't know it was he, of course. And I suppose my nerves were a bit on edge. Thanks for saving me from making a further fool of myself."

As he spoke, he glanced covertly at the badly messed Basco's eyes. They were dull and a topaz yellow, under their beetling thatches of dark brow;—the odd shade of eye seldom found outside the Pyrenees lands. Certainly they were not the luminous black

eyes that had peered eerily in on him out of the night.

While Gale was still staring, Chang, the Chinaboy, came scuttling down from his loft, awakened like Dick by the racket. Chang's eyes were as dark as those of the Unknown. But they were small and slitted and oblique—not in any way like those Barry had seen at the shutter. Turning on Toni, Gale asked, suspiciously, in French:

"What were you doing at the door, just now? How does it happen you're not snoring, out in your shed, behind the fold? What are you doing in the house, this time of night? Speak up."

Toni cleared his voice, looking extremely foolish and still nursing his swelling nose. Then, shamefacedly, he made answer:

"I came to the kitchen for hot water. A yearling ewe has cut her side on the barbed wire. As I went back with it, *Maitre*, I saw a man. He stood by the yard gate. And he looked at the window where was the light of your lamp. This was an hour past. As I looked at him and made a step to come toward him, he went away. But I did not like the way he seemed to be looking at that window. So when the ewe was bandaged, I came back. I came back softly. He had come back, too. He stood near your window. I ran at him. But he heard my feet and he ran, too. The night was dark. I had seen but his shape, and that not clearly. And I lost him as we ran. It is not well that men should prowl about a house late at night, and run when honest folk approach. And, as I have said, I did not like the way he stood looking. It

might be he would enter the house. It is so easy to enter. And it might be that harm was in the wind for you, *mon maitre*, from this man. So I came in softly at the front door that was not locked. And I lay across your threshold, that I might bar the way if he sought to do you harm. I had fallen asleep, when I felt you push the door against me. I rolled away; but not in time. That is all."

And with solicitous fingers he shook once more his loosened tooth. The man seemed ashamed to admit his act of simple doglike loyalty to the master who that day had saved him from the rattlers' fangs. And Barry could see he was very evidently telling the truth.

Gale's feelings underwent a sharp revulsion. He felt as he might have, had he punished Roy for some act of collie loyalty. He held out his hand.

"I am sorry I hurt you," said he. "I ask your pardon, Toni. And I thank you for guarding my door. You are a white man."

The Basco reddened under the praise and the handshake. He wriggled like an overgrown schoolboy.

Then it was they noticed that Roy had been scratching and whining at the closed front door; eager to get out and to pursue the mysterious interloper. The sight brought Gale back to a remembrance of his own purpose in rushing out into the hallway.

"While we've been wasting all this time," he exclaimed, "the man's probably gotten away clean. Come along!"

As he spoke, he caught up one of the three flashlights from the hall-table and ran out on the porch;

with O'Rell and Toni and Chang hard after him. Roy flashed out, in advance of the men, the instant the door opened wide enough to let his wiry body through. With a bark of challenge, the collie galloped around the side of the house, to the single window of the little living room.

Gale, nearest behind the dog, played his electric torch over the side yard, in one sweep. No human figure was revealed by it. But its rays showed a long stick propped against the shutters' outer catch, with its lower end braced by the ground.

Such stout shoring would have resisted stronger pressure than Gale had exerted in trying to force open the fastened shutter. The simplicity of the trick appealed to Barry, even in the haste of the moment.

Meantime, Roy had struck the scent of the stranger, beneath the window, and was casting about, like a hunting dog, to make sure of it. The ground was soft from an evening shower. The flashlights played on the space below the window, where the collie's gold-and-white body was darting to and fro. Reasonably clear in the softened ground, were the tracks of two large brogans.

By the time Gale had caught his first glimpse of these, the dog had struck the scent he sought. Off he dashed, nose to ground, hackles abristle, teeth asnarl; toward the hedge fence which divided the house-yard from the field to the left.

Through a gap Roy fled, Barry behind him; and into the field. Thence, at once, he veered sharply to the left and toward the road. He had reached the

highway and was casting about, once more, for the scent amid the myriad footprints of beasts and humans, when Gale whistled him to heel.

"The fellow's clean gone," said Barry, as the others came up to where he stood, petting the whimperingly impatient collie. "No use chasing him for miles down the public road. Even if Roy should overhaul him, somewhere out there, we'd have no legal proof he was the man who prowled around the house. It'd be Roy's word against his. And juries have a senseless custom of taking the word of a lying human against the word of a dog that can't lie."

But before he went to bed he made a tour of the home lot and of the barns and other outbuildings. Everything was in shipshape. Nothing had been stolen or tampered with. Apparently the intruder had not so much as visited any part of the place except the window behind which Barry had been at work.

At the fold, the dwarfish black collie, Zit, was sitting erect and alertly calm, amid billows of drowsing sheep. These sheep were Zit's lifework. They and they alone were the objects of the little black dog's care. Anything and everything else on the ranch might be in danger; and so long as his beloved sheep were safe, Zit would not have cared.

Gale left Toni, at the back of the fold, beside the shed which was the Basco's sleeping quarters.

"Good night, Toni," said he, as he turned toward the house. "And thank you, again. But another time you mustn't lose your good sleep by trying to guard me. I can take care of myself."

"As you will, *mon maitre*," assented the herder, with a shrug of the wide shoulders. "A day ago I would have said the same thing. I would have said: 'Toni Frouchard can take better care of himself than any other man can take. There is no danger Toni cannot fight through.' This I would have said. Then, this afternoon, Toni Frouchard lay helpless and doomed to death. And he could not save himself. But you saved him. It is a debt. My father told me oftentimes that a man can afford to forget all debts, if need be; except only the debt for his life. And my father was the wisest man between Roncevalles and——"

"The debt doesn't exist, man!" said Gale, embarrassed at the herder's simple earnestness. "I told you that, to-day. I took no chance or danger in killing those rattlers. And I'm not going to have you waste sleep by watching over me. I'm in no sort of peril. Some tramp or panhandler saw the light in my living room and peeked in. That's all."

"Yes, *mon maitre*," meekly agreed Toni. "As you will. Yet the man did not seem to me like a wayfarer of the road. I saw him but ill;—scarce more than his shadow against the weak light of the shuttered window. I cannot say if he was tall or short, fat or thin, white or black. Yet,——"

The Basco hesitated; then said, sheepishly:

"But in that faint glimpse, he—he seemed to remind me,—in his way of crouching and of moving,—to remind me of—of the serpent on my breast this after-

noon. *B'nuit, mon maitre!*" he ended, timidly. "*Dorm' bien!*"

He yawned prodigiously and slouched into his hut. Yet he stayed there only long enough to kick off his boots. Then, picking up his crooked Basque sheath-knife, he stole back to the house, not ten feet behind the unsuspectingly strolling Barry.

As soon as Gale had gone inside and shut the door, for the night, the Basco stretched himself out on the porch, against the closed front door. There he lay until gray dawn; sleepless and ever on guard.

Twice, during the night, he arose silently, and patrolled the dooryard; making a circuit of the house, and then returning to his post on the doormat. Not until he heard Dick O'Rell stirring in his room, preparatory to setting forth on his treasure quest, did Toni forsake his vigil and creep back to his own sleeping shed.

An hour later, he replied to Barry Gale's friendly morning salutation with a surly nod; as the rancher made his early rounds of the barns and the fold. Not by sign or by word did the Basco give intimation that he so much as remembered the somewhat melodramatic happenings of the night. Outwardly, he was the same hulkingly grouchy herder as of old.

Gale came back from his rounds with a royally good appetite and with a glad zest for the morning's ride with Maida. With his own hands he had groomed his roan saddle mare, Señora; until she shimmered like snowflecked maroon velvet.

This mare was the joy of Barry's heart. She was

the get of a famous if pastworthy English hunter, out of an Arizona bronco dam. The blend had made her tough and wiry, as well as gracefully fleet. It had also given her a temper which had been the despair of her Chico breeder; and he had sold her at five years to Barry Gale for scarce half her true value.

Gale, in less than three months, had turned her into a splendid saddlehorse; and had softened much of her vicious temper into mere high spirits. She was still a handful to manage; and took a lot of riding. But she and her master were devoted to each other, for the most part; and Gale was inordinately proud of his beautiful mount. To-day, she was groomed to the minute, for Maida Drace's benefit; and her saddle and headgear were in equally bright condition.

These chores accomplished, Barry was returning to the house for breakfast.

As he entered the doorway, he paused, attracted by a rhythmic soft sound that seemed to be drawing nearer and nearer. Looking out, he saw a man coming slowly up the front path toward the porch.

The man was clad in severe black and he wore an immaculate derby hat;—a rarity in that region of picturesque comfort in worktime dress. He walked with great deliberation, but with absolute certainty. In one hand he carried a malacca cane. This he tapped occasionally on the ground in front of him—in the light rhythmic fashion that had caught Gale's notice.

The newcomer's eyes were open. But they were covered with a dead gray film that almost matched in color his pallid face. It was by these sightless eyes.

that Gale first recognized his unexpected visitor as Sludge, the blind valet of Jared Drace.

Barry stood in mute wonder, gazing at the approaching servant; marking the quiet sureness of his unseeing tread and the deftness with which he made his light cane apprise him of any obstacles in his path. Sludge was still wearing the felt slippers of the afternoon before. And by their help his sensitive feet seemed to sense their way as unerringly as if he had full vision.

That this blind man should be walking alone and unguided, several miles from home and along a route that could not be familiar to him, struck Gale as miraculous. He stepped forward to the edge of the porch and was about to speak; when Sludge stood still; and turned one side of his face toward him as if identifying the sound of Barry's step by dint of memory.

"Mr. Gale?" inquired the valet, lifting his hat.

"Yes," said Gale; adding inquisitively: "How can you tell?"

"I remembered your step, sir, from yesterday," answered Sludge. "There is as much difference in steps as there must be in faces, if a body takes the trouble to study them. I've had to, sir."

"How did you get here?" asked Barry, looking up and down the road for trace of any wagon or car.

"I walked, sir," said Sludge. "The road is very fair. I should have been here sooner. But I took the wrong turning, at the crossroads. I misunderstood the direction a driver gave me, just before that."

"You walked here?" queried the astounded Barry. "Alone? Over a strange road?"

As he spoke he recalled instances of his medical days,—instances of men totally blind who made their way from city to city and through thronged streets with comparative ease; guided, it would seem, either by some mystic sixth sense or by direct Providence.

"The way was very easy to find, sir," said Sludge, as though he had done the simplest thing imaginable. "I had often come as far as the crossroads. And I waited there, to-day, till a driver passed by. I asked him the rest of the journey. If I had not misunderstood him and had to ask another man, later, I could have saved half an hour. I shan't make the same mistake, next time. I never do," he finished with a pathetic touch of pride.

"But how did you know where to turn in?" asked Barry, a little ashamed of his own boyish curiosity. "I mean, at what gate?"

"The man told me it was the third gate after I passed the crossroads," said Sludge. "I could feel, with my feet, when I reached any of the gates. The road at the sides is beaten into a track, by all the feet that turn in there."

As if wearying of the prolonged talk, he slipped his sensitive fingers into an inner pocket of his black coat and drew out a letter, which he handed to Gale.

"Miss Drace wished me to wait for an answer, sir," he said.

Barry ripped open the thick envelope and drew out the single sheet it contained. His hands shook a

little, at the memories evoked by this first sight in so many years of Maida's firm chirography. And he wondered unhappily if she had written to cancel their engagement to ride that morning.

"Dear Barry," he read. "Can you be here at nine, this morning, instead of at ten? I have to be back at home, a little after eleven, to go for a walk with Father. And I do so want a good long ride. If you can't come at nine, suppose we wait till to-morrow? Will you let me know? Sludge will bring me your reply."

Gale looked at his watch.

"Tell her I'll be there at nine," he said. "And can't I send you back in my runabout? It's a long walk."

"Thank you, sir," answered the valet. "But I enjoy walking. It is the only real exercise I get. Thank you, sir," he said again, touching his hat brim, as Barry slipped a dollar bill into his hand. "Good morning, sir."

He turned and made off, down the path, with that sure, deliberate stride which, Barry now saw, was less slow than it seemed.

Gale hurried into the house, bathed, put on riding clothes, bolted his breakfast, and gave such few directions as were necessary to his handful of ranch laborers.

He was absurdly jubilant over the prospect of this two-hour ride with Maida. He loved California; and he was proud of this Golden State of his adoption. It would be good to show off the beauties of the region to the girl he had lost so long and found again.

He was glad the morning was so cool, so dazzlingly clear, so gloriously bracing.

The memories of last night were gone. Gale was very much in love. To such a man, on the way to keep a tryst with his sweetheart, it is hard to remember the bugaboo happenings of midnight. Barry dismissed the whole queer adventure from his thoughts; and looked forward only to the morning's happiness in store for him. It was splendid to be alive!

By a little after half-past eight he was in the saddle; and his highstrung mare was pirouetting and passaging as she minced out of the gateway and into the rutted yellow dirt of the road.

The tingling tonic of the morning air had gotten into Señora's blood as well as into her master's. She seemed to find it hard to keep two feet on the ground at any one time.

Soothing her by laughing words and by patting her vibrantly arched neck, Barry kept her at a fairly sober pace, until their dirt road merged into the pavement-smooth State Highway, a mile beyond; the wondrous gray concrete traffic artery that runs northward as far as Shasta County and southward until it blends with the Camino Real and so extends to the Mexican border itself.

There, guiding Señora into the strip of earth which bordered the highway, Barry gave the mare her head. The ground rose at a very gradual slant and the foothold was springy and soft—an ideal stretch for a gallop.

Señora snorted in glee, as she let herself out in a

scurrying canter which at once settled into a sweepingly smooth run.

The spicy cool air whipped the rider's face. The horse beneath him thundered along at top speed. The joy of it all surged to his brain. Standing up in his stirrups, he shouted aloud, for sheer rapture of living.

With the north wind in one's face and the spring sun in one's eyes, and a grandly galloping horse under one, on a perfect road, it is hard to be sane and reposeful. When every stride of the horse and every wind of the road bring the rider near and nearer to the One Girl, sanity may as well give up the unequal fight.

Spurred on by Barry's blithe shout, Señora gave herself up to the bliss of the crazy race; her whirlwind run as smooth in gait as a rocking chair, her tiny ears laid flat on her outlying neck, her mane flying wild.

Reluctantly, she obeyed the quiet rein-pressure and the regretful voice of her rider, as she drew near the corner where the lane-drive leading into the Drace estate branched off from the concrete highway.

Fidgeting and fretting, Señora slackened her mad pace to a sedate trot; and turned in at the lane-mouth.

She still trembled a little from the excitement of the gay run; and once or twice she snorted, in annoyance, at the too-early check to her frolic; slugging her head forward in a futile effort to get the elusive bit between her champing white teeth.

"Steady it is, old girl" reproved Barry, smoothing her neck and thwarting her playful efforts to gain a teeth-hold on the bit. "Quiet down, now! You'll be

all right, in a minute. And that breather will have taken the raw edge off you; so you won't make me do any fighting when I'm out with Her. I've better things to do, this morning, than to have one of my oldtime battles with you. That's why I let you run so far and so hard. . . . So! That's better! A whole lot better!"

Señora, little by little, forgot her exuberant desire to keep on running forever. She settled to a peaceful singlefoot; and she even forbore to shy, affectedly, when a gray-brown ground-squirrel scuttled across the lane, under her very nose. Gale was right. The whirlwind "breather" had steadied her. Barring some untoward happening that might revive her quieted wild spirits and stir up her uncertain temper, there was every reason to hope she would complete the day's exercise with an exemplary calmness.

A twist in the lane brought Gale out into the open lawnlike space in front of the rambling stone house which Drace had built here in the hilly forest.

No effort had been made to beautify this clearing. The lawn was turfless; being covered with a hummocky and wiry growth of grass which had never been rolled and seldom had been cut. Between hummocks, patches of bare grayish earth cropped up. A rudely laid-out and humpy driveway led up to the flat grassless space before the front steps.

Be the average northern California home never so poor, there are about it, almost always, signs of an effort (generally successful) at beautifying. Flower-borders gird the doorway. Orange trees or flowering

shrubs or roses dot the lawn or dooryard. And climbing roses or, at the very least, the ever-present scarlet geranium, show that the house's dwellers are seeking to add to the floral loveliness of their State.

But here there were no more attempts at floriculture than on the slagheap of a smelting furnace. The house itself had no architectural fineness or grace. It was as squat and gray and forbidding as an enormous toad.

Barry recalled pictures he had seen in a New York Sunday newspaper of two of Jared Drace's country homes,—one of them in Tuxedo and one at Narragansett,—and, remembering the stately elegance and sumptuously artistic surroundings of both of them, he marveled afresh at the aspect of this forbidding and tomb-like abode.

The stables,—a huddle of low buildings that faced on the courtyard to the rear of the house,—were about a hundred yards away from the main dwelling. Toward these Barry Gale now turned his mare's head; when he saw no groom was on hand near the house door to take Señora's bridle from him. He did not like to leave the warm and nervous horse standing out in the wind, while Maida was getting ready; and he sought shelter for her.

But, though he had seen no one, yet apparently he had been seen. For, as he neared the corner of the house, along the illkept drive, he heard a man's voice from somewhere to the rear call out an unintelligible order. And, at once, a Chinaboy came running forward from the huddle of stables.

Dismounting, Barry handed the bridle to the Celestial whose yellow fingers were stretching forth to receive it.

"Keep her walking up and down," he said. "Don't let her stand in the wind. Walk her."

Gale turned and made his way to the front steps. Sludge opened the door, almost before Barry could ring. Here, too, apparently, there had been a look-out for him. For, in this wilderness dwelling, with its few inmates and far fewer visitors, it was impossible that a servant should always be on hand to open the door as soon as the bell might ring.

"Miss Drace wishes me to say she will be here, directly, sir," reported Sludge, reaching for the visitor's cap and riding-crop and laying them on the hall table. "She——"

He was interrupted by the opening of the door which led into Jared Drace's study. Into the hallway emerged Maida. She was in riding clothes, and carried a crop. Her cheeks were fiery red and her eyes were hot with indignation.

She tried to mask her very evident perturbation in a welcoming smile, as she came gaily forward to meet Barry. But, through all her brave attempts at concealment, he could see she was vexed or grieved over something. Judging by the direction whence she came, he gathered that his arrival had interrupted a somewhat vehement and unpleasant scene between her and her father.

Yet Gale seconded her plucky effort to behave as though nothing were amiss.

"I'm just on time, to the minute!" he announced, as they shook hands. "And behold the Eighth Wonder of the World—a woman who is also on time, to the minute! Isn't it a regular made-to-order morning for a ride?"

"It's perfect!" she declared. "Only I feel like a criminal, when I think how much time I must be making you waste, on a day like this;—when you ought to be—to be harrowing the oranges and—and paging the cattle and putting dip on the peachtrees and——"

"You're a born rancher!" he assured her, noting the gay effort to hide her discomfort and eager to abet her. "A born rancher! Only you've got one or two of the technical terms a little mixed. For instance, it's the sheep we harrow, not the oranges. We make the rounds of the orange orchard, every morning, with a feather duster and a pail of dip; and take down the oranges and dust or dip them (according to whether it's the dry or the wet season) and then put them neatly back on their vines. Then we——"

"Then we ride over here and make fun of a poor tenderfoot who is trying to learn ranch terms," reproved Maida, with mock displeasure. "Why, even *I* know that oranges don't grow on vines. And a harrow is—is—well, I'm not quite sure just what it is. But I'm counting on you to teach me. To teach me that and lots and lots of other things about California and about ranching. Shall we start?"

As they came down the front steps, side by side, Gale saw that a second Chinaboy was waiting for them, at the drive-edge, along with the first. The sec-

ond Celestial was holding by the bridle a daintily-built little black gelding; which he now led forward and ranged alongside of Maida.

Gale lifted the girl's slender weight to the saddle; rejoicing inwardly at the light touch of her hand on his shoulder and her tiny foot in his palm. Then he turned to where the other Chinaboy was holding the fidgety Señora.

"Oh!" Maida cried. "Isn't she a perfect beauty? Is she yours?"

"Well," replied Barry, at thought of some of his encounters with the temperamental mare, "sometimes she's mine. And sometimes she decides she's nobody's. But, for the past few months she's been slowly developing from a spitfire into a lamb. I never have any real trouble with her, any more. You see, she——"

He got no further.

As he had talked, he had taken the rein from the Chinaboy. Then,—with Youth's eternal yearning to show off in the presence of a loved one,—he proceeded to vault in spectacular fashion into the saddle, without touching the stirrups.

He had done this, many times. Señora was accustomed to the manœuvre; and stood quietly enough as he sprang to her back.

But as he came down into the saddle, she bade quietness an instant and violent farewell.

Before Gale could find the stirrups, Señora swerved sharply to one side; then gave a maddened forward leap; ran a few yards at top speed and checked her

dash by bounding high in air and coming down with all four small hoofs bunched close together.

The swerve and the forward spring would have been enough by themselves to unseat a man who was not looking for such Buffalo Bill Show tactics and whose feet were not yet in the stirrups. The ensuing buck was still more disquieting to any hope of staying in the saddle.

By luck and by native horsemanship, Barry Gale was able to keep his seat. Gripping the mare with his muscular thighs, he strove, by voice and by crop, to steady her.

But Señora was past such simple restraints. Plunging insanely, squirming, pivoting, she fought like a devil to throw her rider. Her bronco ancestry might have accounted for the bucking and the pirouettes. But nothing but panic or agony could have accounted for most of her lightning evolutions. Back and forth, up and down, she raged; while the man on her back battled grimly to keep his seat and to quell her.

Twice she tried to rear and to fling herself back upon him. Twice, the heavy handle of Barry's crop caught her rearing head, between the ears, and brought her down on all fours again.

By every known and unknown method she endeavored to throw him. She even bolted to the house wall and then passaged swiftly sidewise, striving to scrape him off against the stones.

Barry, as he fought, had a panoramic lightning glimpse of the two impassive Chinaboys standing well out of reach and viewing the entertaining spectacle

with moveless faces. He saw Sludge, standing sightless in the front doorway, his large head cocked on one side, his blind eyes closed; as he attempted to read, by his sense of hearing, what was going on in the drive below. At a window, Gale even caught a fleeting impression of Jared Drace blinking nervously down on the scene of strife.

A plunge of the maddened Señora carried him some slight distance beyond the angle of the courtyard. And as she bounded forward and bucked, Barry could see three or four grinning men in the guard-uniform standing in a knot in the stable yard, enjoying the spectacle.

Gale saw more. Directly behind the guards and watching from over their shoulders, Wolfe Naylor was standing. The expression of Naylor's face set the overbusy horseman's thoughts to traveling in a new and odd line. An ugly suspicion sprang to life in his heated brain; a suspicion that wakened in him a blazing rage.

Maida Drace, sitting her black horse, was deadly pale. Her great eyes burned with dread and fierce sympathy. Twice, as she thought she saw an opening, she spurred her horse forward and tried to grip the plunging Señora by the bit. Barry noted her intent and cried out to her to stand clear of the plunging head and the flailing front legs of the mare.

Then, turning in search of help, Maida saw the knot of guards and Wolfe Naylor in the doorway of the stables. And she called, imperiously, to them to come to the rescue. At the summons, the guards looked at

Naylor, as if for orders. He muttered something. One after another they slunk back into the stable. And he followed them back, out of sight, into the farther recesses of the building.

Barry saw. And the sight confirmed the black suspicion that had flashed so illogically into his mind.

He began to understand. And his anger flamed the hotter. The crazy behavior of Señora's was wholly unlike the mare's former rebellions, even in the early days when she had been at her worst.

This was no outcropping of gay spirits; nor was it a super-exhibition of meanness. The mare was in agony; and pain had driven her crazy. Again Naylor's grinning amusement and that of the guards came to the fighting rider's mind;—this and the fact that Señora had been out of his sight for several minutes while he was in the house.

The frantic mare spun about in a full circle, plunged forward with a buck that jolted the rider's back teeth; and then, with all her force, reared again.

Straight up and backward she hurled herself. Deftly and with mighty strength the man brought down the crop's butt between her ears.

But the overstrained wood had cracked, under the previous blow. Now at the impact, it broke in three pieces. The shock was too slight to stay the brute's attempt at rearing.

Up she flung herself; thrashing the air with her ironshod forefeet, and purposely tumbling backward as if in a wilful attempt to smash Gale under her eleven hundred pounds of kicking weight.

As she towered above him and toppled backward, Barry slipped, eel-like, to one side and sprang to earth; landing with difficulty upon his feet and just clear of the descending mare.

The whole battle-royal had lasted a bare half-minute. But Gale felt as if he had been through a Kansas cyclone. He scarce had presence of mind to leap to the bridle, as Señora floundered to her feet.

To his surprise she made scant resistance as he gripped her bit. She was sweating and trembling and heaving. And her nerves seemed torn to ribbons. But she did not struggle to escape. She stood quietly, after the first convulsive backward start.

Barry was examining her bit and running a practised eye over her foaming mouth and the lathered sides. He could see no spot that showed signs of Señora's having been tampered with during his brief absence. This, and her standing so quietly now he was no longer on her back, led him to look to the saddle for an explanation of her antics.

Throwing the bridle over her head,—the oldtime Western signal to a horse to stand still,—he stepped to the girth and unfastened it. As he undid the cinch he took care to put no pressure of weight upon the saddle itself. Yet, light as was his touch, Señora shivered; and only his sharp command kept her from lurching forward.

Barry lifted the saddle, straight in air; peering under it as he did so. The mare's back was flecked with fresh blood, beneath the center of the saddle cloth. A closer glance revealed at once the cause.

Sticking burrlike into her back was a tiny steel staple whose needle-points had been run through a shallow bit of cork. This had been placed under the saddle cloth so that the first pressure must send the points down through the film of cork and directly into the sensitive flesh.

The stinging pain would have been enough to stir to action a far less nervous steed than the temperamental Señora. And, mentally, Gale apologized to his pet for the murderous thoughts he had been harboring toward her, during the struggle.

The confirming of his sudden suspicions and the knowledge of the cruel suffering inflicted on his beloved mare, sent through Barry's soul a fresh gust of rage against the man who had sought to harm or kill him by torturing his mount.

Palming the bit of barbed cork, he turned to the eagerly solicitous Maida.

"Señora's all right, now," he said, reassuringly. "And we're not going to lose our ride. There was a burr or something of the sort under her saddle. I've taken it out. Will you please have one of your China-boys walk her for a little while; and will you wait here for me? I'll be back in five minutes. I'm going over to the stable for some grease to put over the scratch;—and—and for something else. Then I can arrange the cloth so it won't hurt her to be ridden."

He had steadied his voice with difficulty, keeping the hot anger out of it. Now, without waiting for an answer, he crossed to the stable door, through which he had seen Naylor and the others disappear. Mor-

bidly, he hoped Naylor might still be there; and that he might have a few brief minutes, face to face with the man, out of sight and sound from Maida.

He was willing to take his chances, should any of the guards try to interfere. Barry, just then, was in a frame of mind when right blithely he would have tackled a cohort of professional heavyweights, if also he might have punished the man who had so needlessly tortured Señora and had sought the death or the maiming of her rider.

As he advanced, his anger waxed hotter. His swift stride brought him to the stables and through the low doorway.

Barry found himself in a big and disorderly harness room. Grouped around the room's two dusty windows which faced the house were the four guards he had seen. They had been watching the struggle from these viewpoints, since Naylor had ordered them indoors. Leaving the nearest window,—evidently because of Gale's rapid approach,—was Naylor, himself.

At sight of the man, Gale lost the last remaining shreds of his temper. Stepping up to Naylor, and choking with righteous indignation, Barry ripped off his own coat.

"Take your coat off!" he commanded. "And put up your hands! You're going to get the thrashing of your life. Hands up! Unless you want to take a licking without defending yourself."

As he spoke, he struck Naylor across the mouth with his open palm.

Under the blow's whalebone force, the secretary

staggered back, a pace. Gale, with fists tight clenched, followed him up; bracing himself for a furious rush from his challenged and smitten foe.

To his astonishment, Wolfe Naylor did not attack. Instead, the man turned and ran. At top speed he ran to a corner of the room. There, from its hook on the wall, he snatched a fire-ax. Swinging this aloft, he whirled around and flew at Barry like a rabid cat.

"Bear witness, all of you!" he shouted, as he leaped at the unarmed Gale. "Bear witness this man assaulted me. He is trying to kill me. I am acting in self-defense."

And, whirling up his ax, he struck with all his furious might, at Gale's bare head. Barry sprang back from the smashing blow. But the other men had slipped between him and the door.

CHAPTER FIVE

THEN and then only did Gale see how completely he was trapped. In front of him was Naylor, calculatingly homicidal, even in his seeming rage. Behind, four guards barred him from escape by the door. Unarmed he faced a man resolved on his death—a muscular and wiry man who wielded an ax.

Even in that stark instant, Barry saw the cleverness with which Wolfe Naylor had set his trap, when Gale had blundered into the stable. These guards were his creatures—ready, doubtless, to swear later on that Gale had attacked Naylor with some lethal weapon and that the secretary had been forced in sheer self-defense, to strike him down.

Meantime, Naylor had brought up the ax for a second stroke, more cleverly aimed than that first mad smash which Barry's backward leap had eluded.

The man's little blue eyes were pale with passion. His lips were tight set. Between them oozed a splash of blood from Gale's blow. The guards crowded forward, cutting off further chance of retreat.

Cornered, desperate, Barry did not wait for the ax to fall. Dodging to one side as though in a futile effort to escape, he flashed in at Naylor, with the speed of lightning.

The feint served. As Gale dodged, Wolfe Naylor altered in midair the direction of his descending ax-

blade; and smote mightily with both hands at the prey that seemed to be trying to slip past him to the open space at the rear of the room.

At once, Naylor saw his error; and he sought to change the direction of the downswEEPing weapon. But he was too late. The whizzingly heavy ax-blade grazed Gale's shoulder, as the ranchman ran in. And it shore deep into the wooden floor of the room.

Before Naylor could wrench it free,—almost before it touched ground,—Barry Gale was at him.

There was no time and there was no scope for boxing. What was to be done must be done before Naylor could lift the ax again;—before any of the guards could have a chance to come to the rescue. Football training of ten years earlier served Gale's turn.

Plunging at Naylor, head down, arms extended, he caught his antagonist in true tackle-fashion, well below the loins; whipping both arms about the secretary's lean legs.

Then, calling on all his strength and skill, Barry changed in a trice from football player to rough-and-tumble wrestler. Even as he tackled his man, he drew his own body into a compact mass; both legs under him. And, he heaved; driving himself upward with a herculean shove of the legs and a wrench of shoulders and arms.

Flying, spreadeagle, Wolfe Naylor sped through the air, over Gale's heaving left shoulder. The maneuver was simple and it was not new. But it had been executed with bewildering speed and accuracy; and it had caught Naylor totally by surprise.

Through the air hurtled the secretary's long body, arms and legs whirling. Naylor's head was the first part of him to come in contact with the wall, nearly five feet away. He crashed into the concrete partition with an impact which half stunned him. His body collapsed to the floor and lay there supine and moveless.

Barry Gale did not so much as wait for the luckless secretary to reach his aerial flight's destination. The instant he had flung Naylor over his shoulder, he was once more the scrimmaging football player.

Head down, shoulders hunched, he catapulted into the least narrow of the gaps, among the four huddled guards.

What had happened had been done so incredibly fast that the unprepared men's minds had not had the nimbleness to follow it. At one moment their chief had been rushing on this fated intruder with upraised ax. The two combatants had crashed together. In practically the same second, Naylor had flopped through the air; and a human battering ram was tearing past them.

Before the jostled quartet had any clear idea of what had happened, Gale had dashed between two of them and was through the doorway.

His had been no dime novel exploit of the single hero who outfights five strong men. Such heroes do not exist outside the pages of thrilling fiction; as any real life athlete can testify. He had merely caught Naylor offguard by an old football trick; and had followed this by escaping before the leaderless guards could grasp the situation's sudden change.

Out through the doorway he sprang. Then he came to an abrupt halt in his flight. Maida Drace had followed him across the space from the house. And he all-but collided with her as he gained the safety of the open.

He heard the men hurry to the doorway after him. He heard the irresolute shuffle of their feet as they came to a hesitant stop at sight of the girl. He did not look around. He knew these mercenaries would not follow into the light of day and into the presence of one or more witnesses. For the time, at least, the incident was closed.

"I came over to tell you I got some salve, from the house," Maida was saying, "and I put it on your poor little horse's back. So don't bother looking longer around here for grease. Are you sure you can fix the saddle-cloth so it won't hurt her to be ridden?"

"Indeed I can," he assured her. "You're not going to miss your ride, just for a burr. And I'm not, either."

He was grateful that Maida attributed his flushed face and hurried breathing to his recent tussle with Señora. And he hastened to lead the way back, toward the horses, lest some word or other sound from the harness room give her an inkling of what had just gone on in there.

"You couldn't get what you went for?" she asked him as they moved, side by side, in the direction of the two mounts.

She glanced at his hands, seeming to expect that

he might be carrying a pot of axle-grease. "Didn't they——?"

"Oh," he answered, lightly, "they were ready and eager to give me all I wanted,—and more. But it wasn't quite what I had gone there to get. So I came away."

"You have splendid control of your horse!" Maida praised him. "I never saw better riding, while——"

"While it lasted?" he hazarded. "Thanks. But if I'd known what ailed Señora, I'd have cut short the exhibition, the first second, by dismounting. That was all she really wanted me to do. She couldn't say it in words. So she said it in drastic fashion with every inch of her body. Let's forget about it, shan't we?" he went on, as he adjusted the saddle-cloth, nicking a hole in it above the scratch. "I'm only sorry it startled you. Honestly, I don't give a roughriding exhibition every time I happen to be on any one's lawn. I think I can promise it won't happen again."

As he said it, he recalled the thwack of Wolfe Naylor's head against the concrete. And he felt fairly well justified in believing the trick on Señora was not likely to be repeated.

He did not trouble himself as to the possible extent of Wolfe's injury. He was quite certain he had not killed the fellow. And, for any injury to him short of that, Gale was human enough to be glad.

But a slight qualm crept over him as he visualized what must have been his own fate, had he been a fraction of an instant less quick, in eluding the ax's vicious swing. And, to make himself forget what

had so nearly happened, he began to talk fast and at random.

"Look!" said he, as they debouched into the State Road, from the lane. "Do you see that hill, over yonder? Well, that's where we're going first. From the summit, you can see 'the kingdoms of the earth.' At least you can see the ranch kingdom of O'Rell and Gale. And about a thousand or a million square miles of the most beautiful scenery on earth, besides. Are you good for a cross-country canter?"

For reply, she flicked her black horse, and cleared the ditch into the field beyond. Then, leading the way, she cantered up the slope toward the hill he had pointed out.

He was neck and neck with her as the horses toiled pluckily up the last steep furlong of the rise. Then, with a wave of his arm, he cried:

"There it is! All the world at our feet."

Maida gave a little gasp of wordless appreciation, as she gazed about her at the panorama that spread out below them and on every side.

"There, to north and there again to eastward," explained Gale, "are the two giant guardians of this valley and of the lands above. Two eternal snow-crowned giants, looking down on the wonders beneath them. The giant to the north," he expounded, raising his hand to where, far in front of them a tremendous snow-shrouded mountain reared its dazzling white bulk to the soft blue heavens, "is Mount Shasta. It's a good deal more than seventy miles away from us. But on days like this, it doesn't look ten miles off. That's

another of the North California miracles, by the way; —the days which turn space into nothing. Imagine seeing any seventy-mile distant mountain, back home, as vividly as we see Shasta!"

"Oh!" breathed the girl, shading her eyes with her riding gauntlet, the better to shut out the sun-glare and focus her gaze on the wonder-mountain. "Do you know, I've looked again and again for Shasta, since I've been out here? And I never saw it before. At least, once, last week, I saw a mountain I thought must be Shasta. But it was that lower snow-capped mountain, over to the right. Father says sometimes Shasta is invisible for weeks; and then as plain as day for months at a time. He promised to show me where to look for it. But he's so busy and——"

She did not finish the sentence. And her sweet voice trembled, ever so little. There was a shadow, once more, in the eyes that just now had been so happy. She turned her head aside, lest Gale notice the brief change in her aspect. And, tactfully, he made as though he had not seen or heard. Instead, he went on talking of the view before them.

"That other snow-mountain,—the one to the right," said he, "is the second of the region's two guardian giants. The one you thought was Shasta. That's Mount Lassen. Ever hear of it, before?"

"No," she admitted, "I haven't. You see, I've been here hardly a month. And I've had to stay pretty close at home, for the most part, since I got here. There was no one to take me around and show me things."

"That's a misfortune we're going to cure," he prom-

ised. "I elect myself, here and now, your 'Seeing Northern California' guide. It's worth seeing. Better worth seeing than almost any other part of the world."

"I've been in Southern California, of course," she answered. "I've been there, twice. But never north of——"

"Southern California was made by man," he said, oracularly. "And a beautiful and artistic and spectacular joy he made of it. But Northern California was made by God. And His work, as always, is ten times finer than man's. Tourists swarm through the southern part of the State. And not one of them in fifty ever bothers to come as far north as this. It's their loss. There's nothing lovelier, anywhere. Do you know why I asked you if you'd ever heard of Mount Lassen?" he broke off, checking his enthusiasm and harking back to the earlier subject.

"No," she returned, puzzled at the query. "Ought I to have heard of it?"

"All Americans ought to have heard of it, as far back as when they were in school," said he, "and not one per cent of them ever have. Every one has heard of Stromboli and Etna and Vesuvius and——"

"But those are volcanoes," she objected. "And somehow people are always more interested in such deadly things as volcanoes than in humdrum mountains that don't have craters and eruptions."

"See any clouds in the sky, to-day?" he inquired with seeming change of theme.

"Why,—no," she returned, her glance sweeping the flawlessly azure skies, "none, anywhere. Except,—

yes,—I see that queer little cluster of whitey-gray clouds hanging just above Mount Lassen. Those are the only ones.”

“Does it seem odd, at all,” he asked, “that the only clouds on this perfect day, should cluster around one mountain top? The reason is,—Mount Lassen is a volcano.”

“No!”

“The only active volcano in the United States!” he made proud answer, as though the mountain belonged to him. “And not a handful of people in the East have ever so much as heard of it. They travel to Italy to gaze on Vesuvius. And yet here in their own country is an active volcano every bit as impressive and probably with as much potential deadliness as Vesuvius. Queer, isn’t it? A thing is of tremendous interest,—as long as it happens to be in some foreign land.”

Maida was eyeing the snowy expanse of mountain-top with new and keen curiosity.

“And those are really volcanic clouds,—volcanic vapors,—above it?” she asked.

“Yes. Sometimes they hang like that for days and nights. Sometimes the crater is quiet and there’s not even a wisp of smoke above it. Then,—especially before an eruption,—that graying crown of clouds shows out. I’ve seen only one real eruption of Lassen, since I’ve been here. That one was a beauty. In our ranch dining-room hangs the ‘Vulcan Head’ photograph of one of the biggest eruptions of late years. I spoke to you about the sulphur tinge in some of the water,—up by Iron Canyon, for instance. And you

must have noticed the volcanic rocks scattered over that ridge, yesterday. Well, where you find sulphur in the water and volcanic rocks and then a real live volcano in the middle distance, you may know, pretty accurately, that you're in a country where eruptions were once a lot bigger and more violent than they are now."

"Are the eruptions ever dangerous?" she questioned, her fascinated gaze still held by the snowy mountain.

"Not in recent centuries," he reassured her. "And scientists have proved they can never again be powerful enough to devastate any part of this region. But,—well, a lively eruption, in company with a lively little California earthquake, might some time do a good bit of damage to things that weren't anchored pretty firmly. That's just my own theory," he hastened to add. "Wiser people hereabouts would laugh at it."

"I do hope it won't happen while I'm out here!" she exclaimed, fervently. "I——"

"Don't worry!" he adjured. "There'll never be an earthquake in this part of the State, heavy enough to do any general damage. . . . See those twin mountains, between us and Lassen?" he continued. "Those are Tuscan Peaks. Up along their lower slopes is an immense tract of government grazing land. I send my sheep up there in summer, when all these lower pastures are parched and when the mercury, down at Red Bluff, gets to coquetting between 110 and 116. The government lets us graze our livestock out there and on a lot of other tracts. So much, per head, by the season. Even the biggest ranchers make use of it, nowadays. You see, the day of the enormous ranges is passing.

People and companies that used to own ten or fifteen or twenty thousand acres are finding it more profitable to split up the bulk of their holdings into smaller ranches and sell them. It's cheaper to rent grazing privileges from the government than to carry so much land as they used to. And to pikers like Dick O'Rell and myself, it's a genuine boon."

He glanced apologetically at her, fearing she might be bored by his shoptalk. But she was listening with a very genuine interest. And, eager to speak of his life-work to this girl who meant everything to him, he continued:

"But livestock is only a side issue with Dick and myself, just now. We're centering our powers on rice. In this part of the State, for the moment, rice is king."

"Rice?" she repeated. "Why, I thought that grew in the tropics."

"It does," said Gale. "And it grows here, too. In fact, it grows as far north as Shasta County. There's a fine big rice-paddy, up near Redding. There's a lot of excitement about cotton, in some parts of California, too. But rice is the new gold-fever, hereabouts. The flood tide of it set in, after a Hindu came over here, and cleared up \$150,000, from a mere shoestring, by growing rice for three years on leased land. Then a couple of youngsters from Sacramento borrowed \$500 and went into the rice game, hereabouts; and netted \$23,000 on the deal."

"On \$500 capital?" she asked in wonder.

"There have been bigger profits on smaller outlay," said Barry. "The old yarns of the miners who found

fortunes in gold are being dwarfed by the rice-stories. Dick and I are going in for it, strong, while the going is still good. For, I don't suppose it can last forever. But while the rice prices and rice demand stay up, it's a bonanza for us. We had a tract of hardpan that was just a sheep range. No ordinary crop would grow on it. We leased a tract next to it; and built our levees and went to work. It cost us about \$37 an acre for plowing and seeding and irrigating and for every other expense. And, the very first year,—that was year before last,—we averaged 3,400 pounds of rice to the acre. We did still better, last year; and we ought to do nearly as well, this. Next year we'll get nothing out of our old paddies; and that's why we've made new ones. You see, about every third or fourth year, the water-grass gets such a hold that the crop is choked to death. That and the trouble in getting the right amount of irrigation. But when we get the Iron Canyon Dam project through, we'll have irrigation for five counties. By that time the bottom may have fallen out of the rice market. Or the 'red rice' may have gotten the best of the crops. You see, all farming is the most stupendous gamble on earth. But it's also the one gamble where grit and brain can stem the tide of ill luck. That's what makes it so fascinating. I'm boring you to extinction with this gassing of mine about a subject that can't possibly interest you," he finished contritely.

"You are not boring me," she said, simply. "And I wish you wouldn't say you are. I'm enough of a Primitive Human to love a struggle. That's why I

was so thrilled by your fight with Señora; even while it frightened me, terribly. And it seems to me the mightiest and most thrilling struggle in the world is man's struggle against nature;—his struggle to wrest crops and livelihood from a soil that always is trying to elude him and to return to the wild,—a soil that is scourged by drouths and blights and insect pests and a million other setbacks. To see a mortal man face these myriad obstacles and fight his way through them to victory and to competence,—why, it is the most wonderfully inspiring sight imaginable! I'm not saying that to make a hit with you," she laughed, as if ashamed of her own vehemence. "I'm saying it because it is true. Now, take me down to your ranch, if we have time, and show me all of it."

"It is a fight!" he said, stirred by her keen interest. "Though I never thought of it that way before. Here, in this so-called 'semi-arid' district, where the year's average rainfall is only about twenty-four inches, you see what a weapon we've made of irrigation. And in this State, to which Man came to grub for gold, he and his sons have remained to make the wilderness blossom like the rose. Yes, we're fighting. And we're winning!"

They had left the hill behind them and had returned for a time to the gray concrete road. Now, another bit of cross-country riding and the undoing of a gate brought them out of the rolling upland where grazed the ranch's sheep.

As they turned into the pasture, Zit, the dwarf black collie, caught sight of them. Instinctively, the little

dog trotted between them and the sheep he was guarding.

One or two of the more timid animals had already looked up from their grazing, at sight of the riders; and began to huddle and to mill, as if preparatory to a run. But the tiny black dog yawned prodigiously and stretched himself out on the ground in front of the flock, as if for a snooze in the warm sunlight.

Seeing their guardian taking so uninterested an attitude toward the mounted intruders, the worried sheep decided the riders were nothing to be scared about. And they resumed their nibbling of the short gray-green grass. Which was precisely the effect the wily little sheepdog had intended to produce by his clever acting.

"Isn't it all glorious!" sighed Maida in rapture. "The wonderful mountain wall on every side, with Lassen and Shasta so shiningly bright above them all;—and then the blue of the sky and the sage-green of the grass and the tumbled masses of gray-white sheep and that gigantic shepherd over yonder keeping watch on them? It's something to remember, forever."

Catching his employer's eye, Toni bowed impressively, from the far end of the field; concentrating his curious dark-browed gaze on the fair girl at his employer's side and drawing truly romantic conclusions from the spectacle.

Gale was about to suggest that they ride over to him, when a scampering commotion at a far corner of the field interrupted his half-spoken words.

That corner of the pasture abutted on a dense thicket

of chapparal which ran back to where the undergrowth of the woods, behind, blended with it. A few score sheep had been grazing there, apart from the bulk of the flock. Now, with common consent, this bunch of stragglers threw up their heads and broke into a wild stampede; hoofbeats and bleats mingling in a chorus of terror.

Away from that chapparal copse they fled, at top speed. Nor did they rejoin the main flock, which lay at right angles to them. Instead, they stampeded directly from the copse and toward the road.

In a flash, little Zit was after them. His squat black body fairly flew along the rising ground. From his course, it seemed to the onlookers that he must surely cut through the very center of the raggedly galloping throng.

But the wise sheepdog knew better than did these humans. He had planned the exact line of his pursuit, with the unerring judgment of distance and direction that is inherent with his breed. Instead of smiting the midst of the stampede, he struck its farthest and raggedest corner, lining the stragglers into close formation as he went.

Then, whipping around in front of them, he turned them as compactly as though they were a column of cavalry and headed them back for the main flock. Once behind them and having headed them aright, he dropped to a wolflike trot, weaving from side to side of the rear rank to round up any strays, but slackening speed in order to encourage the sheep to do the same.

As a result, the bunch had come down to almost a

walk, before reaching their fellows, and a few had even begun to graze. Their advent, thus, was so gradual and non-sensational that it did not rouse any excitement at all in the main body. Had they continued their first speed and come charging down on the flock, the compact and content mass would have disintegrated into two thousand scattering units. And Zit would have had his work cut out for him, for the best part of the next hour.

Having brought back the strays and circumvented an incipient wholesale panic, the little black dog loped off to the corner of the field whence the sheep had galloped; and proceeded to investigate the cause of their flight.

He crossed the gray-green expanse and came to the chapparal copse. Into this he wriggled his stocky body and on through it, until he was lost to sight by Gale and the girl.

"What do you suppose scared them so?" Maida asked. "They ran as if——"

"Nobody ever knows what scares a sheep," answered Barry. "If it isn't one thing, it's another. If it isn't one thing or another, then they're perfectly capable of stampeding at nothing at all. If there is anything on earth stupider and timider than a sheep, I never heard of it. That bunch were probably not frightened by anything. They just took it into their fool heads to stampede. I don't suppose there's anything more formidable than a jack-rabbit hidden in that copse. By the way, the railroad men, out here, call the big jack-rabbits 'narrow-gauge mules!' I——"

A sharp yelp of pain from Zit interrupted his homily. Then followed another and louder cry from the dog. And, presently, the little fellow emerged from the copse, limping and whining; and made straight for Toni, for protection.

As he passed close by Gale and Maida, they saw his back was bleeding as from the welt from a heavy whip or stick and that he dragged one foot painfully as he ran.

"Some one in there pitched onto the poor little chap, as he was searching!" cried Gale. "The same 'some one' who scared the sheep. Wait, here, please! I'll be right back."

He headed Señora for the chapparal and sent her across the field at a run. Toni, from his own nearer section of the field had already noted the condition of his cherished dog; and he was making for the copse with seven-league strides of his long legs. Above his head he brandished the stout staff he carried. And from his bearded lips he spat forth a whirring volley of patois curses on the assailant of his Zit.

Into the copse, from opposite sides, dashed Barry and the Basco. In its center they met, scratched and battered by prickly branches; but having caught no glimpse of any interloper. Nor did a ten-minute beating of the copse, from end to end, bring any better results.

At last, leaving Toni to tend his man-handled pet, Maida and Barry left the pasture and rode on.

"What could it have been?" asked the girl, for the

second time. "Couldn't you find any trace to help you guess?"

"No," said Gale, masking his perplexed annoyance as best he might. "No trace at all. There was a broken twig here and there; but nothing further. The fellow had a good start. He could have gotten back through the chapparal into the woods; and so away before we reached the copse. Probably it was some tramp, drowsing there; whose sight or scent frightened the sheep and who resented being waked by Zit. He hit the little fellow with his stick and kicked him; and then made off before we could run him in for trespassing.

"See those ground squirrels playing over there?" he broke off, switching the subject. "Sometimes, in a long ride, you'll see perhaps fifty of them, sitting on posts or crossing the roads. They're pretty nearly our worst pests. It's good-by to the orchard they take a fancy to. We poison them and we shoot them and we trap them. But we don't make much headway. In some places you'll see signs, adorned with skulls and cross-bones, and exhorting ranchers to make a campaign against them. Down along parts of the Camino Real, I've seen as many as twenty ground squirrels, in less than five miles, lying dead in the road where cars had run over them as they were crossing from one field to another. They——"

"Barry," accused the girl, "you're worried over that adventure in the copse, back yonder. And you are talking about other things, to make light of it. I'm not a kindergarten child, to be kept from sharing the annoying things of life. You and I are such old friends!

And friends ought to be partners in bad luck as well as in good. What do you suppose was in that copse? It isn't likely that the sheep should have run away, just because a tramp was asleep there. And a tramp would not have had any grudge against that poor puppy, to treat him so cruelly. What was it?"

"I don't know," said Barry. "But it's nothing to bother about."

"There is so much, lately, that I don't know!" she sighed, the look of unhappiness coming back to her deep eyes. "And so much to 'bother about!' I hate mysteries. I hate them! And ever since I've been in California, I'm hemmed in by them. Barry, I'm so worried about Father! He isn't one bit as he used to be. It isn't like him to turn himself into a hermit; and to brood alone, by the hour; and have long secret conferences with Wolfe Naylor; and hide himself from the whole world. He used to love to have people around him and to get every bit of enjoyment out of life. Now he shuts himself up in that dreary barracks in the wilderness and bars every one out. I've asked him about it, again and again. But he always puts me off and declares it's nothing at all and that he's taking a rest cure. Rest cure! Why, just look at him! He's turning into an old man. And he never rests. What can it mean, Barry? And in a sweet, peaceful, hospitable region, like this, why should he surround himself with twenty or more armed guards? He doesn't need protection. He hasn't done anything wrong. He has no enemies. What *does* it all mean?"

"I don't know," answered Gale, soberly. "And,

while it's none of my business, I've been wondering the same thing. I wish there were something I might do to make life pleasanter and easier for you, while you're here. Why don't you go back, East, away from it all? It can't be pleasant for you to be mured up here, with no friends and no amusements."

"That's what Father says," she replied. "He wants me to go back. He didn't even seem glad to see me; when I came out here as a surprise for him. But he is in trouble of some kind. And he is thousands of miles away from his own people. I'm not going to leave him. I couldn't be happy, going back home and remembering how miserable and lonely he is. My place is here."

"I wish I might be of use," said Barry. "If ever I can be, you don't need to be told how glad I'll be if you'll call on me for anything."

"I *do* know it, Barry," she said gratefully. "And I'm ever so much less lonesome and blue and desolate, now that I've met you again. Honestly, I am. Only, everything is so queer and so different. There's Wolfe Naylor, for instance."

"Naylor?" he asked, seeking to speak indifferently. "Your father's secretary? What about him?"

"He's so different from what he was, back at home," she complained. "He's been with Father for nearly four years. And he was such a quiet, efficient, severely correct, respectful automaton; till he came out here. He was the perfect, machine-like private secretary; like the ones on the stage and in books. That was the way I remembered him. I hadn't seen him for the best part of a year, till I came to California, last month. And

I'd never have known him as the same man. He's grown so arrogant and so—so familiar;—and almost as if he owned the estate himself."

"Is he discourteous to you?" demanded Gale, sharply. "If he is——"

"No, no. He's very nice indeed to me. He puts himself out to be nice to me and to try to make life pleasant. He's always at my elbow with some suggestion for my comfort or amusement. But—— Oh, well, he's different, that's all! It's just one more mystery."

"No," denied Gale. "It's part of the same mystery. I'd stake my life on that. Whatever the mystery may be."

But he was wise enough not to say it aloud.

"Then," pursued Maida, shifting her ground with dismaying suddenness, "then, Barry, there's—there's —*you!*"

"I?" he queried, in preplexity.

"Yes," she insisted. "That's another mystery. And you won't solve it for me. When I asked you, yesterday, why you dropped out of my life so suddenly, four years ago, without giving me any explanation at all,—you put me off and said you couldn't tell me. I suppose I ought either to be deeply offended by your saying that; or else I ought to accept it with childlike meekness. But I can't do either. I want you to tell me, Barry. Won't you? It worries me. It's worried me for years. You and I were such good pals, and we had such beautiful times together, there in Baltimore. And then, all at once you dropped me and——"

"No!" he denied, vehemently. "No! Don't say that. I didn't 'drop' you, Maida. No sane man could ever 'drop' you!"

"No?" she laughed, to cover the odd little thrill that tingled through her at his earnestness of words and look. "Then what else was it?"

For an instant he made no reply, but rode with down-cast eyes and with so troubled a face that Maida half-repented her question. Then, speaking slowly, and with face still averted, he said:

"I went away from you because I had to. There was no mystery about it. Nothing but heartache; so far as I was concerned. And I crossed the Continent. Then, through no volition of either of us, we are together again. . . . Do you happen to remember the old Syrian tale of Sheik Ben Ysouf? As the Sheik slept on the roof of his Jerusalem house, he heard, in a vision, Allah, the Most High, say to the Death Angel: 'Take thy sword and smite Ben Ysouf, the Sheik!' Ben Ysouf waited to hear no more. He rose and fled from his house and from Jerusalem. Nor did he check his flight until he reached the gate of Damascus; five days' journey to northward. And there in the gateway of Damascus, stood the Death Angel. And the Angel said to the Sheik: 'It is well that you are come to Damascus, oh Ben Ysouf. For it was *here* that the Most High bade me slay you!' "

"It's a queer story," commented Maida, after a brief silence. "And I suppose it makes sense. But I don't quite see the connection. I hope you don't hint that I'm the Death Angel waiting for you on the other

side of the world from where I first met you?" she finished, with an effort at lightness.

"I gather," he evaded, "that the story means a man can't escape his fate by running away from it. Let it go at that, shan't we? There is the first of my rice paddies, there to the left. Just beyond that yellow bank. That's part of our levee system. And now I want to show you the oranges. We won't have time for much more, if we're to get you back home by eleven. If you aren't too busy, perhaps you'll let me take you down to Red Bluff, some day soon? It's a mighty worthwhile town. And the ride is fine. May I come over to-morrow morning for you?"

"Yes, indeed!" she assented, gladly; then her face clouded a little, as she added: "That is, if Father doesn't need me, to-morrow morning. To-day, just before you came, I went into his study to tell him you and I were going for a ride. And he said he needed me there, to help him docket some papers, because Mr. Naylor was to be busy on some other work. I told him he had said he wouldn't need me till eleven. And he—he almost lost his temper. At last, he told me to go ahead; but to consult him before I made any more engagements. Wasn't that a queer thing for him to say to me? He never spoke so, before. Oh, there's so much that's changed and—and puzzling!"

As Barry Gale cantered off down the rough driveway, after leaving her at the foot of the Drace veranda, Maida handed her mount to one of the Chinaboys, to take to the stables. Then she climbed the veranda steps and stood gazing down the drive at the vanishing

rider. Her eyes were strangely misted; and a wistfully happy little smile played about her soft lips.

As Barry disappeared around the bend, she turned to go into the cheerless house. Directly behind her, Wolfe Naylor was standing.

So silently had he come out from the house that Maida was not aware of his nearness, until now she confronted him, face to face. She hesitated, expecting him to stand aside for her to pass indoors. But he held his ground.

His small blue eyes were fixed on hers, with an odd intentness she had noted in them more than once since her arrival in the West. And he made no move to let her go by him into the house.

"Pleasant ride?" he queried, abruptly.

"Very, thanks," she made answer.

"I think Mr. Drace would rather you didn't go riding with young Gale," he went on. "In fact, I'm sure of it. He said as much, after you left."

Maida stared at him, in wondering disapproval of his impertinence. Then, stiffly, she said:

"My father can tell me of his wishes, himself, Mr. Naylor; and not through his secretary. I am sorry he thought fit to discuss my affairs with you. I am going in to dress, now. May I trouble you to let me by?"

Wholly ignoring the snub, Naylor kept his position in front of her. Into his cheeks,—which were unwontedly pallid and sickly from his head's contact with the partition wall,—crept a dull red. His eyes smoldered.

"I am glad you said that," he returned, choosing his

words carefully, yet speaking as though resolved that nothing should turn him from his purpose. "I am glad, because it gives me a chance to tell you why I ventured to interfere. It is because your welfare means more to me than anything else in the world. Because," his forced calmness forsaking him, swept away by a fierce ardor that suddenly obsessed him, "because you mean more to me than anything else. Because I love you, Maida!—*I love you!*"

For an instant, the girl stared up at him in speechless amaze; doubting if she had heard aright. But his flushed cheeks and convulsively working lips and blazing little eyes were proof enough.

"I love you!" he was repeating, over and over. "I meant to wait longer,—to wait till,—till the right time,—before I told you. But when I saw how Gale looked at you last evening,—when I saw——"

"There is no need to speak of Mr. Gale," she checked his fierce outburst. "I am sorry,—very, very sorry, you said all this, Mr. Naylor. Shan't we both try to forget it, please?"

Again, she made as though to pass him and go indoors. But, stung past all his hard-held self-control by her answer, the man caught her hungrily in his arms and crushed her slender body to his breast.

His lips sought hers, and he was panting incoherent love words as he rained kisses on her head and brow.

Then, her moment of paralyzed incredulity passed; and she was herself again.

With all her vigorous young strength she wrenched herself free and shrank back from him with a look

whose utter loathing even the love-crazed Naylor could not fail to read.

Before she could speak, his arms were about her again. She beat fiercely at his chest and struggled in sick horror to free herself. But his strength was thrice as great as hers.

"You'll listen to me!" he cried, hotly. "And you'll find you can't fight against me. You're mine. Forever and ever!"

CHAPTER SIX

BATTLING madly, silently, Maida sought to free herself from the embrace that sickened her very soul with a sense of loathing*degradation.

She had been able to keep her face averted from Naylor's avid attempts to kiss her lips. But, fight as she would, she lacked the power to free her struggling body from the clasp of his wiry arms.

And now, pinioning both her arms with one of his own, Wolfe Naylor,—still babbling wild love-words,—caught her head with his free hand and strove by sheer strength to turn it so that her face should be his to kiss.

Feeling herself unable to resist the agonizing pressure, Maida, in crazed desperation, drove her white teeth deep in the fleshy part of the man's palm. The pain and suddenness of the bite made him recoil for the briefest instant.

In that infinitesimal moment, Maida tore free from him and sprang toward the door. At once he was after her; and in a single bound had caught up with the girl as her hand was on the doorknob.

At his clutch on her shoulder, Maida whirled about and lashed him across the face with her riding crop; striking with all the force of panic terror.

Naylor reeled back; both hands clapped to his bleeding visage. Maida took advantage of the instant's respite to fling open the front door and to dash into the house.

She was about to slam and bolt the door behind her, before Naylor could follow. But as she sprang into the hallway, she saw her father emerging from his study.

"You're late," began Jared Drace, in dry reproof. "I asked you to be back by——"

"Father!" she sobbed in hysteric fright, rushing up to Drace and flinging her arms about his neck, for protection. "Father! Wolfe Naylor—he tried to kiss me! He caught me in his arms and wouldn't let me go! I had to strike him with this crop to make him loose me! He——!"

Naylor came in as she spoke; and with a shudder the terrified girl clung closer to her father. The secretary's lips and cheekbone were bruised and bleeding from the slash of the crop. But in his eyes still gleamed that wild flame of eagerness. Nor did he hesitate at sight of his employer; but stood returning Drace's look of stark indignation.

"You hear what my daughter says, Naylor!" rasped Drace, furiously. "If you've any excuses or apologies, make them as quickly as you can; and then get out of my house and out of my employ."

"I told Miss Drace I loved her," answered Naylor, unflinchingly. "And I repeat it. I love her. And I ask her to be my wife."

"Your—your wife?" shrilled Drace, in keen disgust.

"Yes," retorted Naylor. "My wife. I love her and I want to marry her. What is more," he continued with a quiet intensity that sent a new thrill of terror through the listening girl, "what is more, I am *going*

to marry her. Preferably with your consent, Mr. Drace. But, if necessary, without it. I get what I want. And I want to marry Maida. Please understand it, clearly. I think that is all there is to be said about it."

For a space, Maida feared her father might be going to have an attack of apoplexy. Jared Drace, as he listened to Naylor's calm avowal, shook from head to foot. The dry and withered aspect of his face gave way to a wave of color that enpurpled his lean cheeks and lent him an air of youth. His old eyes blazed with rage. His fists clenched; and, but for Maida's cumbering weight against his breast, he would have flown at the tall and muscular man so much his junior and so infinitely his physical superior.

Maida, through all her fear for him, was comforted and proud that this father of hers had come out of his strange self-absorption in her hour of need and was her gallant champion against the beast who had laid hands on her.

Father and child were closer together in soul and heart than they had been for many a long day. Jared Drace had risen from the withered and introspective shell which had of late encompassed him. And once more he was a man—a man and a father.

"You have fifteen minutes," he said, when he could master his angry voice into coherence, "you have just fifteen minutes to pack and clear out. When you are ready, come to my study and I will give you a check for three months' services. I shall not give you a recommendation of any kind. Remember, you are to be

out of my house in fifteen minutes. If you are not, I shall order the guards to eject you by force. I——”

“The guards?” queried Naylor; and he laughed.

It was a genuine laugh of amusement; tinged with a certain conscious superiority.

“The guards? Very good, sir. Just as you wish.”

He nodded, and walked past them, through the hall, to his own quarters at the rear of the house.

“The swine!” raged Drace, glowering after him.

“The presumptuous puppy! Because, out here, I’ve put certain—certain responsibilities on his shoulders and admitted him more to my confidence and society,—he has the idea he can make love to my daughter and—and embrace her against her will; and then carry it off with that mock-superior air of his! Well, you heard me give him his walking papers. I can vouch for it, he’ll never annoy you again, little girl of mine! Dad’s so sorry you had this fright!”

He stooped and kissed the flushed and grateful face she lifted so lovingly to him. Then, patting Maida on the shoulder, he said:

“It’s been slow for you, little daughter, in this lonely house. I’m sorry I was cross, about your going riding, to-day. We must try to give you better times, after this; and not let you mope about with no one to talk to. Besides, now that I’ve kicked Naylor out, I shall have to impress you into service, now and then, as my secretary, till I can replace him.”

He frowned at something conjured up by his own words; and repeated, fretfully:

“Till I can replace him!”

Then, abruptly, he left Maida, and went into the study, shutting the door behind him.

Happier at heart than she had been in weeks, Maida went upstairs to her own rooms, to change from her riding clothes. In spite of the shock and revulsion caused by her violent scene with Wolfe Naylor, the girl was glad. She was infinitely glad that she and her beloved father were again on the sweetly intimate terms of other days. She was glad the house was to be cleansed of Naylor, whom she had always vaguely disliked and for whom her dislike had deepened during these past weeks of everyday association.

And, far down in her heart, she was gladdest of all that Barry Gale had come back into her life. As she busied herself in dressing, she began unconsciously to hum a love-song he and she had long ago sung as a duet, in the Baltimore days. And she fell to recalling the inflections of his voice and the ill-hidden stark adoration in his eyes as he had talked with her during the ride.

Once or twice, as she busied herself about the room, she shivered, at unbidden memory of Wolfe Naylor's clasp. And she scrubbed the forehead his lips had brushed;—scrubbed it until splashes of rose-red stood out on the fair skin.

But for the most part her thoughts were busy with Gale. And for the hundredth time, she conjectured vainly the reasons for his strange conduct in throwing away their friendship, four years ago and in refusing to tell her why he had done it. Every tone, every glance of his told her he had not run away from her

for any lack of liking; and that he was deliriously elated at their reunion.

Again, she began to hum the old love-song; and a tender smile wreathed her lips, as she looked forward to the days of companionship with him that were to follow, here in this wonder country of the West, where they had met again so strangely. Now that her father was more like his former self and now that Wolfe Naylor was to be packed off, she could invite Barry to the house, often. He and her father were certain to grow to like each other. And roseate dreams usurped the place of common sense in the girl's happy mind.

When she had finished dressing, she sat down and wrote a note asking Barry to dine with her father and herself on the following evening. Then she glanced at her watch.

Nearly an hour had passed since Naylor had been ordered to leave the house within fifteen minutes. He must have gone, long ago. And, perhaps her father might already be in need of some one to help him with his correspondence or in some other of the various details in which Naylor had made himself useful.

Scolding herself for her delay, Maida started downstairs to offer Drace her services.

Halfway down the stairs, she paused and glanced through the transom of Drace's closed study door to see if her father were in; or if she must seek him elsewhere. Her careless glance swept the room, as she stood there on the stairway.

Then her idle eyes became focussed; and she stared in unbelieving dismay at the scene so clearly visible

through the transom glass. Not realizing that she was gazing on what was not intended for her to see, she stood, rapt and incredulous.

Jared Drace sat huddled low in his great desk-chair, his face in his hands, his whole body quivering as with a chill. He was a right pitiful figure,—spineless, beaten, terrified.

Above him, seated on one corner of the table, towered Wolfe Naylor. The secretary was talking;—calmly, authoritatively;—his lean face wearing a half-smile.

Though the closed transom-glass prevented Maida from hearing a word Naylor was saying, yet there was no mistaking the import of the scene. An hour earlier, Jared Drace had ordered this man out of his house in disgrace. Now, the secretary not only had not obeyed that command, but he was very evidently master of the situation. And Drace was all-but groveling before him, in humiliation and fear.

Rooted to the stair, Maida stood moveless and wide-eyed, for minutes; as Naylor talked on. Then she saw her father lift his face from his hands, and turn a terror-blanced face of utter cowed misery on his secretary.

Drace said something, his twitching fingers clasped in apparent appeal. Naylor laughed, reassuringly; and slapped his employer on the back in boisterous good-fellowship. The old man winced and cowered under the coarse familiarity; but resented it in no way.

With a sob, Maida came to herself; and rushed up to her own room; locking herself in. All her world,—her beautiful world with its myriad recent promises

of happiness to come,—was crashing down about her ears. She could not understand anything of what she had seen. It did not make sense to her. And her efforts to solve the puzzle only numbed her power to think with any clearness.

Out of the chaos, at last, one fact stood out clear. Whatever the meaning of the sight she had just witnessed, she remembered that her father had ordered Naylor from the house and had told her the secretary was to go. Drace was ever a man of his word. If he had said Naylor was to go, then assuredly Naylor was going.

Moreover, it was not to be thought of that her father would tolerate in his house a man who so grossly had insulted his daughter. True, Naylor had not gone in the prescribed fifteen minutes. But, undoubtedly, he would go as soon as he had completed that strange interview she had unconsciously spied upon.

Thus, when luncheon was announced, she went unhesitatingly down to the dining room, certain the secretary would be gone. But he had not gone.

He and Drace were just seating themselves at the lunch table, when Maida came into the room. Drace looked like a man who has just passed the crisis of a mortal illness. Naylor was debonairly serene. His face, in spite of the welt from Maida's crop-slash, wore an aspect of smug contentment.

As Maida appeared in the doorway, Naylor sprang up from his seat and, waving aside the Chinaboy, drew back her chair for her. As he did so he turned on her a smile of lovely welcome.

For a moment Maida stood, transfixed with unbelief and horror; while Naylor smiled invitingly at her and Jared Drace guiltily avoided her indignant questioning eyes. Then, turning to the stolid Chinaboy, she said:

"You may bring my lunch up to my rooms."

The next instant, she was gone. And the men heard the light tread of her feet on the stairs. Then came the sound of her room door closing.

When the Chinaboy bore the luncheon tray upstairs, Maida Drace was lying across her bed, weeping heart-brokenly. At the servant's tap on the door, she fought down the tears and called to him:

"I've changed my mind, Chu Fing. I shan't want any lunch, to-day."

Half an hour later, as she was bathing her swollen eyes, there was another rap on the door. And Jared Drace's voice called timidly:

"May I come in, dear?"

She crossed the room, turned the key and let him in. Drace entered, hesitatingly, his furtive eyes still refusing to meet her gaze. Nor, as he shut the door behind him, did he seem to know just what to say. It was Maida who broke the awkward stillness.

"Well?" she asked, coldly. "Has he gone, yet?"

"Naylor?" he queried, in momentary evasion.

"Naturally," said Maida, anger tinged by a pity for the broken and shuffling old man before her. "Who else? You said he was to go in fifteen minutes. More than an hour later, you and he were lunching together. Has he gone, yet?"

"Well,—no, he hasn't," admitted Drace, confusedly. "He hasn't. And that is what I came up here to speak to you about, little girl."

But he did not speak. Instead, he fell silent, puckering his white brows and fumbling weakly at his watch-chain. And again it was Maida who spoke first.

"Do you mean to tell me," she asked, incredulously, "that you will let him stay on here,—under the same roof with your daughter,—after the abominable thing he did, this morning?"

"He—he has apologized for that, dear," the old man hastened to assure her. "He admits it was a rough and hasty action. And he asks me to bring you his apologies; since you wouldn't stay downstairs, this noon, to receive them. He is sincerely sorry for frightening you so. Sincerely sorry. I—I am certain it will not happen again."

Maida could not believe the evidence of her own ears.

"Father!" she exclaimed.

"I know, my dear," muttered Drace, "I know! It was very rude,—very distressing! I—I lost my own temper, at the time. But when a man is honestly regretful for a fault,—and if that fault is due to a sincere emotion, such as true love,—why, one can scarcely refuse to accept his contrite apologies, you know."

He spoke haltingly,—his eyes anywhere except on hers,—forcing out his words as though repeating a carefully learned speech.

Maida stared, aghast. She could not believe this was

the same man whose honest anger in her behalf had played like forked lightning about the secretary's head.

"Father!" she breathed, again; feeling herself to be in some fantastically hideous nightmare.

Spurred by her tone, Jared Drace prattled on:

"You see, daughter, a man in love is a man temporarily insane. And as a matter of fact, no man need be ashamed of an honest love. No man's honest love degrades the woman it's lavished on. Poor Naylor lost control of himself, for a second. He won't do it again. I am certain of that. I have his word for it. And it would be cruel in me to discharge him, and perhaps wreck his career, for one such slip. Especially, since he is so sorry for his discourteous behavior. So," he finished lamely, "I am giving him another chance."

"Another chance?" she echoed. "Another chance to make brutal love to me?"

"No!" he declared.

"But what is to prevent him?" she insisted, hot with anger. "If you can overlook such an affront to me, this time, why, next time, you will probably be asking me to consent to marry him."

"No!" he cried; with a flush on his grayish face. "A thousand times no! I'd far rather see you dead than married to such a man!"

And now there could be no doubting Drace's fierce sincerity. It shone from his tired old eyes, transfiguring them.

"No!" he repeated. "I pledge you that shall never happen. Rest easy about it."

"Then," she urged, "when you know he has boasted

to us that he 'always gets what he wants' and that he wants to marry me,—when he has insulted me, vilely, to-day,—when you ordered him to leave,—why, oh *why* do you let him stay on?"

"I've just explained that to you," said Drace, his momentary indignation merging into peevishness; while the look of furtive fear crept back into his face. "Besides, the fellow is tremendously useful to me, just now;—he is all-important to me in an all-important deal I am putting through. When that is safely out of the way," lowering his voice and speaking with a senile cunning that sent a qualm of disgust through Maida, "when that is safely out of the way, I'll send him about his business in double quick time. I promise you that."

"In the meantime, he is to live in the same house with me?" asked Maida. "He is to have every chance to do again what he did to-day? I am to see him and treat him as if nothing had happened? Oh, Father, that is so impossible, so unworthy of you! Won't you do as you planned; and let me act as your secretary until you can get some one, more competent than I, to fill Wolfe Naylor's place? Won't you? *Say* you will! Say you'll discharge him and let me do his work!"

"I—I can't!" he muttered, wretchedly. "I—I wish to God I could, dear! But,—just now—I can't get on without him. I can't. I can't explain. You'll have to take my word for it. In the financial world, there are many associates that are uncongenial. But we put up with them with the best grace we can. So long as

we need them. And Naylor is absolutely necessary to me, just now."

Into Maida's vision, as the querulous old voice trailed off, came the picture of the scene she had witnessed in the study.

"Father," she asked, abruptly, "what hold has Wolfe Naylor on you? Why are you so afraid of him? If there's something discreditable in your life that he has found out, don't let him blackmail you this way! Let him tell. Let him do his worst. You and I will weather it, side by side, somehow or other; no matter how disgraceful it is."

Again she saw the glint of complete sincerity in her father's eyes as they met hers,—firmly and steadfastly, for once. And Jared Drace replied:

"There is nothing shady or disgraceful in my life, daughter. He is not a melodrama villain who has dug up some crime of mine that can't bear the light. He has a hold on me. Yes. But not that kind of a hold. I can say no more about it. And I don't even know how you chanced to guess that much. But, through that hold and because he is so needful to me, I can't discharge him, just now. I must not only keep him on here, but I must try to make life pleasant to him;—for my own sake and for yours. That is why I ask you to behave toward him as though nothing had happened;—to let us all three pick up our domestic life here as it was this morning, before he——"

"Before he treated me as you would have killed him for treating me, if your mysterious business interests here did not take precedence of your only daughter!"

flamed Maida. "When my mother died, you promised her you would be both mother and father to me. How are you keeping that oath? Would my mother have let a man stay in her house after he had insulted me as Wolfe Naylor insulted me this morning? Would she? Would my father have consented to it, a year ago? Father, there is something troubling you terribly,—frightening you,—killing you by inches. Won't you tell me what it is; and let us face it together?"

She stretched out her young arms to him in imploring appeal, as she spoke. For an instant, she thought Drace was hesitating,—that the icy mask of secrecy was breaking up,—that he yearned to share his blighting secret with this daughter who was so ready to stand by him in woe or weal.

But, as his lips parted, there was borne through the open window the sound of Wolfe Naylor's voice shouting an order to one of the guards. And at the sound, a tinge of dread,—of sheer cowardice,—overspread Drace's countenance. He seemed to shrink within himself.

"I must go, now," he said fussily, his eyes once more eluding her. "I have a very busy afternoon before me. . . . You are making a mountain out of a molehill, my dear; and imagining all manner of things that don't exist. I merely ask you to try to maintain harmony and good feeling, here, for a time;—to be civil to Naylor,—cordial to him when occasion demands it,—not to anger him. And on his part, I am certain he won't forget again the respect that is due you. I——"

"In other words," said the girl, slowly, "though you

will see to it that he shall never marry me, I am to be polite and cordial to him, so that he may fancy I'll some day consent to marry him? And that will keep him in a good humor?"

"You have no right to twist my words so!" fumed Drace, with the impotent bluster of a man hopelessly in the wrong. "You know very well, I never implied anything of the sort. I—I——"

"Then what else was implied?" she challenged. "After what happened this morning, if I am cordial and pleasant to him, won't Wolfe Naylor have every right to believe I no longer resent what he did;—and wouldn't an affection for him be the only thing that could make any girl fail to resent it? What better encouragement could he ask? It stands this way: I am to help you along by pretending to encourage him;—until you no longer have need of his services and until you can break the hold he has gained over you. That is what you ask me, in effect, to do."

She paused, as if for an answer. But the man stood with mutely hanging head and shuffling feet.

"I have never yet disobeyed you, sir," she continued, presently, as Drace did not speak. "I had hoped I should never have to. But when a father forgets his duty toward his daughter, I think the daughter is justified in forgetting her duty toward him. Justified or not, it is what I am going to do. I shall not speak to Wolfe Naylor again. I shall not show by word or look that I know he is here. I shall take my meals in my own rooms, until he is gone. I shall not stay in any

room he enters. That is final, sir. I am sorry. But this is one thing I can't help you in."

She spoke with a sad finality. There was no rancor or defiance in her measuredly sweet voice. Drace stood, irresolute, for a moment, then turned slowly and made for the door; walking with the hesitant and springless step of a very old man. As his shaky hand touched the knob, Maida said:

"If ever there is anything else you'll let me help you in,—any peril, any labor,—I think you know I will do it for you; if it takes my life. I suppose that sounds melodramatic, too. But I mean it."

He paused again, his pale eyes misting with unwonted moisture. Then,—

"You're a good girl, Maida," he mumbled. "A—a good daughter. I wish I might be a better father to you. Some day, perhaps,—some day, I——"

The door closed behind him, leaving his muttered sentence uncompleted.

Long and motionless, Maida Drace sat; gazing with unseeing eyes at the wall in front of her. Then, dully, she got up, went over to her desk and took out the note she had written so blithely, before luncheon;—the note asking Barry Gale to dine with her father and herself on the following evening. She glanced down at it, and sighed; and tore it into four pieces.

Yet Gale was destined to receive at least one more note from the Drace house, that day; even if not from the girl he loved.

To make up for his two-hour holiday of the morning, Barry worked hard and late; not turning into the

ranchhouse dooryard until dusk that evening. As he reached the yard he saw a Chinaboy going in at the gate; and in the twilight he recognized the visitor as one of the two servants who had so impassively watched his tussle with Señora when he had ridden to Maida's home.

The Chinaboy, catching sight of Barry, left the gate and came toward him. Taking from his blouse an envelope, he tendered it to Barry; walking off without a word, as soon as this mission of his was achieved.

Gale carried the note up the steps and to a spot on the porch where a shaft of radiance from the just-lighted hall lamp could fall on it. His fingers trembled a bit as he pressed the envelope; and he wondered why Maida should have written to him so soon after seeing him.

He was of no mind to let Dick O'Rell's noisy chatter interrupt the reading of his sweetheart's words. So, instead of going indoors with it, he stopped in the patch of lamplight on the porch, to read it undisturbed. But even before he opened the envelope, he saw that the handwriting was not Maida's. Indeed, it was not handwriting at all; for the superscription and the letter inside were neatly typed on stiff and heavy correspondence paper. Gale read:

"Barry Gale, Esq.

"My dear Sir:

"At Mr. Jared Drace's direction I am writing to convey to you his regretful decision that he cannot ask you to repeat your visits of to-day and yesterday to his home. Mr. Drace, while in California, desires com-

plete seclusion for himself and for his family. He must therefore request that neither you nor any other casual chance acquaintance intrude on his privacy or on Miss Drace's.

Respectfully yours,

WOLFE NAYLOR,
Secretary."

Barry Gale read and reread the stilted and ill-mannered note. His first impulse was to tramp over to the hermit estate and punch the writer's head. His second thought was that Naylor,—who for some unexplained and illogical and apparently dime-novel reason, seemed to yearn for Gale's death or injury,—had written the letter of his own volition.

But at once Barry saw that this supposition was absurd. The letter's recipient would be certain to ask an explanation or at the very least would mention the matter to Maida. In which case, if the note were unauthorized by Drace, the secretary might well lose his job.

No, the message was genuine enough. There could be no doubt of that. Drace had commissioned his secretary to forbid Barry the house. He had turned the task over to Naylor;—lacking the negative courtesy to pen the dismissal himself.

Barry's craving to punch Naylor's head now began to include a byproduct of wrath, in the shape of a fervent wish that Jared Drace were young enough to receive a share in such a thrashing.

He recalled his semi-appointment to ride with Maida on the following morning; and he wondered how best

he could explain to her his inability to come to the house whose doors were now closed to him. If she did not know of Naylor's note, she might well think her cavalier was inexcusably rude in breaking the appointment.

However, all that complication could be taken up at the proper time. At present, in spite of the annoyance of the note, the long day of outdoor work had made Barry hungry. Supper ought to be ready for him, by this time. And he, most assuredly, was more than ready for supper.

Stuffing the letter into his pocket, Gale entered the house. Roy had been left at home that morning on account of the ride with Maida which was to have begun his master's day. At Barry's first footfall in the yard, the collie had sprung eagerly to the front door and had begun an assault on its panels; whining eagerly in his effort to reach the beloved overlord who that day had refused to take his canine chum along on his journeyings.

As Gale threw open the door, Roy leaped upon him, patting him ecstatically on the chest with his fast-flying little white paws, striving to lick his face, and quivering with ecstatic delight at this reunion after a whole day of absence.

Thus do collies greet the homecoming of the man whom they have accepted as their god. Thus do they render joyous homage to their deity. Thus do they shame the more selfish devotion of their fellow-mortals;—asking only to serve and to love and to guard; with no reward save a careless pat on the head or a

word of friendliness. And because their loyalty is so perfect and so easy to win, it passes unnoted in the pursuit of less worthwhile life-gifts.

There was a light in the living room; and thither Barry turned his steps;—Roy scampering gaily about him with a series of staccato welcome-barks. Before Gale could reach the room, Dick O'Rell came hastening out of it to meet him.

Dick's welcome, this night, was as excitedly noisy as Roy's own;—but far less selfless. O'Rell was in high excitement. Bearing down on his cousin, he half-dragged him into the living room and slammed shut the door behind them.

"Listen, old man!" he exhorted. "I've got news! He-news! Gorgeous news! News I wouldn't ask you to swallow if I hadn't packed the proof-positive along with me. Wait a second, till I make sure the shutters are tight closed and that Chang isn't floating around the hallway anywhere. We don't want all Tehama County stampeding here. And that's what'll happen if this thing gets out."

Barry listened to him with very mild curiosity, and with still milder interest. He had quite forgotten, for the minute, the treasure-hunt which had been the avowed object of Dick's morning. Having not the slightest faith in the scheme for finding the gold cache on Gopher Hill, he had let the day's events drive the subject from his mind.

His volatile partner was forever effervescing with some wildcat scheme or other; was forever going into noisy enthusiasms over something which later proved

to be worthless. It was Gale who served as the balance wheel of the ranch's affairs and whose frequent wet-blanketing of Dick's visionary projects succeeded in keeping their property on a paying basis and out of the bankruptcy courts.

Just now, he was infinitely more interested in eating a hearty supper and getting a good night's sleep, than in hearing O'Rell evolve some wondrous plan for sweetening the silt soil in the "south hundred acres" or for hiring a professional rainmaker to eke out the ranch's bare twenty-four average yearly inches of rain.

Barry was about to say something of the sort and to sniff the air hungrily in search of some luring scent of ham-and-eggs and boiling coffee. But the thrilled blissful look on O'Rell's face checked him. Gale felt as though he had been about to push aside some child who was bent on showing him its new doll. He had not the heart to snub Dick's radiant enthusiasm; without at least hearing what he had to say.

Sitting down in his favorite big chair—a disreputably swollen and misshapen seat, upholstered in shabby torn brown leather,—he drew out his pipe and filled it.

"Fire away!" he said, resignedly.

Dick had not waited for the permission. Already, in gobbingly excited phrases he was beginning to tell his tale.

"I'll start at the beginning," said O'Rell, "and I'll get to the point as quickly as I can."

Barry groaned in spirit. Seemingly, from the preamble, this was to be one of O'Rell's more or less lengthy stories; leading up to what Dick evidently

deemed a dramatic climax. He lighted his pipe, and said once more:

"Fire away!"

"I went up to Gopher Hill, at daybreak," began his cousin, "as we'd arranged I should. I decided to spend the first two-hour shift in quartering the ground; and in marking it out in sections; each one about big enough to thrash out carefully in one morning's two-hour shift. That's the systematic way to——"

"To give the Argentine ant a fine chance to work out his unholy alliance with the mealybug, in wrecking our oranges," supplemented Gale, crossly, "and to let the red rice get a nice tidy start in the paddies, and the barley to get a few choice blights and the rest of the ranch go to blazes. In those two hours a day, hundreds of really needful things could be done. We're short-handed as it is. You know that. And with unskilled farm labor at \$4.50 a day——"

He was ashamed of himself for this rude damper on his chum's eagerness. But he was hungry; and this cock-and-bull search for non-existing treasure annoyed him.

"Quite so," assented Dick, cheerily, and in no way cast down by his cousin's growled disapproval. "Quite so. All those things could be done. But would they be worth a trifle more than fifty thousand dollars to us or to any one? Would they? Chorus by the company: 'They would not!'"

"And this fool gold hunt——"

"This fool gold-hunt," Dick caught him up, "is paying gilt-edge dividends, the very first day out. Just

bear that in mind, a few minutes, won't you, and let it keep you from all these merry little interruptions? I've got a yarn to spin, I tell you;—a yarn worth hearing."

"Go ahead!" vouchsafed Gale, wearily, yet perplexed in spite of himself at the hint as to dividends.

"I quartered the hill and made my cairn marks," proceeded O'Rell. "It didn't take me anything like two hours. So I came back and got Fraser and Kline to help me on those new levees. We were through, a little before sunset. And I thought I'd fill out my day's two hours of treasure-hunt. So I went back to the hill.

"By the way," he broke off, whimsically, as Barry's fingers began to play an impatient tattoo on the chair arm, "as I was coming down from Gopher Hill this morning, I saw, a half-mile or so away from me, a man and a woman on horseback, riding along the upper road. They didn't seem in a hurry, at all. So I inferred the man couldn't be a rancher. Or else he'd have remembered about Argentine ants and mealybugs and red rice and unskilled labor at \$4.50 a day and a lot of other things; and he'd have said to that very pretty girl: 'My dear young lady, I can't ride any farther with you, to-day, because there's a swad of work that needs to be done. And in my absence there is nobody but my clever and efficient and handsome cousin, Richard O'Rell, Esquire, to superintend it.' That's what the horseman would unquestionably have said; if he'd been a rancher. It pained me to see a man wasting so much of a fine working morning as he was wasting. Want

to hear the rest of my story, Barry, now that you've wethblanketed the edge off it? I was all het up over this thing, when I started. But I don't care, now, whether I tell the rest of it to an old grouch like yourself, or not."

This was as near an outburst of temper as the sunny-natured Dick ever indulged in. Gale frowned in annoyance, for a moment; at the turning of the tables and at the knowledge that Dick had seen him riding with Maida.

Then came the realization of his own priggishness—born of fatigue and of the day's events,—in rebuking his cousin for wasting less time than he himself had squandered. And he got up, thrusting forth his hand.

"I'm a mangy hypocrite, Dick!" he declared in swift remorse, "and a prig, besides. I went riding with Miss Drace, to-day; and I was off the job for more than two hours. And here I've been grouching at you for taking a two-hour flutter in treasure! I'm sorry. Honestly, I am. You're—you're three times the white man I'll ever be, and——"

"Shut up!" exhorted Dick, much embarrassed by his partner's humility. "Shut up, and go back to your disreputable ragbag of an easy chair; and listen to this yarn of mine! It's a good one. And now you've got me all keen again to spin it to you. Listen:"

He stood on the hearth, facing his repentant cousin, and resumed:

"Where was I? Oh, yes, I remember! I went back, along about sunset, to Gopher Hill; and made for the section I had decided on as the one to explore first.

But I didn't get there. The section I was aiming for was at the very crest of the hill. Well, about two-thirds of the way up to it, on this side, where that steep bit of rocky grade begins, under the summit, I made a short cut, through a manzanita thicket. The bushes stood high and thick; but it looked like an easier way than shinning up all that slope of loose rock. I'd gotten through the thicket, almost to the far edge of it, scrambling uphill all the way and sometimes having to grab hold of one of the smelly red bush-stems to steady me. Then what do you suppose happened?"

He paused in true rhetorical style, for reply.

"You woke up and found it was all an evil dream?" hazarded Gale, monstrosly solemn. "And that you were no longer the Gypsy's Bride?"

O'Rell glared coldly at him; then ignored the flippancy, and proceeded:

"I stubbed my toe over a bit of rock. It hurt like the very deuce. For it hit me on my very worst corn. I got mad, and reached down and groped for the measly rock, to throw it into the next county. I picked it up. And it wasn't a rock, at all. It was—*this!*"

Opening the table drawer, he lifted out a jet black bar of metal; perhaps four inches wide, by four inches thick and some twelve inches in length. From the way he handled the thing, it seemed heavy.

Holding it up for Gale's inspection, Dick then laid it carefully on the table between them.

"That's what I found," he proclaimed. "Now, maybe you'll agree with me when I say the very first day's treasure hunt has brought in big dividends!"

Barry eyed the dull black oblong without comprehension. His mind, jaded by weariness, could not grasp the import of Dick's revived excitement at handling the object.

"Looks like a badly-baked brick," commented Barry. "What's the main idea?"

As he spoke, he smothered a yawn, and glanced apologetically at his cousin, as if deprecating his own lack of interest in the other's eagerness.

"The main idea," answered O'Rell, bending over the sinister-looking black oblong, "is this: Watch it!"

He made a sudden motion of his right hand. Barry blinked uncomprehendingly, for half a second. Then, the weariness and boredom were wiped from his face as by a sponge.

With a wordless cry of stark astonishment, he bounded to his feet and stooped breathlessly over the black brick.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DICK O'RELL had evoked this sudden eager interest in his find by the simple device of scratching a corner of the oblong with the blade of his pocket-knife.

Through the narrow gash in the black surface glittered forth a ragged twinkle of aureate light. It was this which had brought Barry Gale to his feet and set him to staring at the brick, in amaze.

Gale picked up the heavy little bar and held it close to the light. Through the scratch made by Dick's knife, shone that shimmering spark of living sunshine. Stupidly he stared at it. Then, with unconscious movement, he turned the brick over in his hands. On the lower surface was a second and larger scratch, through which an even wider slash of brilliant metal gleamed.

"That's where I nicked it, when I first examined the thing," explained Dick, vastly proud of himself. "I thought it would give you a bigger shock if I made a new scratch for your benefit. If——"

"Gold!" babbled Gale, foolishly. "GOLD!"

"Well," remarked Dick, gleeful at his chum's crass bewilderment, "it certainly isn't permanganate of potash or bituminous coal or even celluloid. It's gold, all right. Unalloyed gold. Twenty-four carat, at that.

I dug it with my thumbnail, and it was soft enough to——”

“Gold!” repeated Barry, dazed. “Good Lord!”

Into his numbed senses crept the mystic lure and magic of the precious metal he was fingering;—the same wizard charm which, since the birth of time, has maddened mankind and made men squander home and business and life itself in an obsessed pursuit of the wondrous stuff;—the magnet that drew across the thousands of miles of hostile and wilderness plains the fathers of California.

Barry forgot for the time that he was a clear-headed and steady-nerved ranchman. He forgot even that he was hopelessly and despairingly in love with a girl he could never hope to win. He forgot everything except that he was at grips with one of the mightiest and most terrible of all human emotions: the gold-lust.

He had held in his hands, more than once, checks which doubtless represented a far larger sum of actual money than did this ingot. And he had not then known the irrational thrill which now encompassed him. For now he was face to face with the actual symbol of all wealth and of human grandeur.

He was holding between his palms a mass of raw metal;—the metal that men spend decades and fortunes and souls and lives in seeking. The treasure-mania had him by the throat. He was aghast at the magic power whose breath was setting his well-balanced brain awirl.

“Yes,” spoke up Dick O’Rell, reading his face and his every dizzy thought. “I know just how you feel.

I felt that way, too. Only maybe more so;—being a flyaway sort of chap; and not an old sheet-anchor like you. I hadn't quite calmed down, even when you got home, just now, you know. Barry, we've struck it rich!"

His partner's words brought Gale back to sanity. He laid down the ingot. And with it he shook off in part the momentary gold-mania that had gripped him. He tried to banish the rest of it by cold reasoning.

"This thing," he said, thickly, "is a bar of gold, covered over with black paint. . . . Do you remember that time, when you and I were kids, and Dad took us both to the mint at Philadelphia? Do you remember the consignment of gold bars they showed us,—the bars that had just come in, under heavy guard, and that had been painted black to escape notice as the guarded wagons trundled them through the streets to the mint? . . . This is a gold bar, covered with black paint. And you found it at the edge of a manzanita thicket, part way up Gopher Hill. At first glance, it would seem you've blundered on the cache where the Ruggles brothers' loot was cached. That is, if Curly Enright wasn't lying, as I still believe he was. At first glance, it would seem you'd stumbled on that loot. But I don't believe you did."

"No, Barry, my little man," replied Dick, nettled at his partner's ponderous platitudes and by his line of deduction, "no, of course I didn't. I was lying to you. I didn't find it there at all. I found it growing on a vine. The long-missing ingot vine. I'm going to cut the 'eyes' out of this ingot and plant them in one of

the rice paddies. Then, after they sprout, we can have thousands of nice fat gold ingots. Enough to buy us chuck steak and potatoes for breakfast every Sunday and a pint of ice cream on our birthdays. Won't that be nice?"

"Hold on!" interrupted Barry, not at all impressed by his cousin's annoyed irony. "I didn't mean that I doubted you found it just where and how you said. You ought to know better than that, Dick. What I meant was, I don't believe this ingot can be part of the Ruggles' loot."

"No, indeed," agreed Dick, in a maddeningly soothing tone, as his temper frayed still further at Gale's denseness. "No. You're right. It can't possibly be part of their plunder. It can't. That stands to reason. Their cache is probably on some other part of the hill. This ingot is an outcrop of some goldmine. An up-to-date mine where Mother Nature takes the trouble to smelt out all her gold and mold and paint it and then leave one of the ingots sticking up out of the earth to guide folks to the mine and induce them to delve for the rest. Like the peanut or lemon drop the candy butchers used to toss in our laps on trains, to coax us into buying a whole bagful. It's——"

"Dick," snapped Barry, "sometimes I wonder why an otherwise omniscient Providence ever took the trouble to give you a voice at all, and then forgot to gear it up to your brain. Your head shows the worst bit of 'assembling' on record. All the needful parts except the tongue and the vocal parts were left out or disconnected. Now if you'll stop trying to be sarcastic

(and succeeding only in being asinine) I'll tell you what I mean. That bullion the Ruggles' outfit stole was on its way down from the mine when they nabbed it. It went by stage, down toward the mining center at Redding. Good. Well, from all I've read of the old mining days out here, they never took the trouble to paint the stuff when they shipped it, from one point to another. And it's a certainty they didn't ship it in brick form. They probably sent it down to Redding in the handiest and easiest shape, after it had been mined. I don't pretend to know much about such things. But I'll wager they never molded it into bricks and painted it, for a trip like that. It most likely went through the local smelting furnace,—if it wasn't just unsmelted dust,—and then was hustled down to Redding, as it was."

Dick took up the bar again and stared at it with a new thoughtfulness.

"That sounds like mighty good sense and logic, old chap," he said, after a minute of brooding reflection. "And it fits in with the things I've read and heard about mining customs, up north, yonder. Just the same, it can't be so. Why, just look at the facts! We read a deathbed confession of Curly Enright's,—that the Ruggles' plunder was buried on a hill, hereabouts. We know Curly was forever exploring Gopher Hill. To-day, hidden on Gopher Hill, I find this ingot. Is it likely that there are two independent caches on that one little hill? There has never been any story of other gold cached near here. This must be the same lot. Don't you see it must?"

"No," said Gale, stubbornly, "I don't. This ingot is molded and painted in shape to go to the sub-treasury or to be shipped to Europe. They didn't ship gold in that shape from little upcountry mines, in the early Nineties. They——"

A knocking at the front door broke in on their argument. Both partners started, nervously. O'Rell slipped the ingot back into the table drawer and turned the key, which he pocketed.

He and Gale went together out into the hallway. Barry, tingling with the groundswells of excitement and quite prepared for new complications, threw open the front door.

On the threshold stood Caleb Romeyn, a rancher from two miles down the road to Red Bluff. He was a plodding, matter-of-fact oldster; and his uninspiring presence did more than could anything else to bring the two householders back to normal thought and action.

"Hello!" said Romeyn, stepping in, unasked. "I was on my way back from Redding,—took the wife up there to see her folks. We was brought up, thereabouts, her and I. And I stopped in on my way home to ask you boys what luck you've had with that Gov'ment 'Sperimental Station barley you was bragging about last time I saw you. If it's turned out the way you figgered it would, I was thinking of putting down my ten-acre corner in it, when——"

"It turned out even better than we were 'bragging' it would," answered Barry, as O'Rell seemed still too full of his gold-obsession to make instant reply.

"Only, you're wrong about our getting it from the Experimental Station. Sale got his original seed from there and made the hit of his life with the crop from it. We got our seed from Sale. He won't sell it outside Tehama County, you know. And he's right. Our own good little county, first of all. The people who were guying him for going to the County Agent for seed and for advice, are all falling over themselves, now, to do the same thing. This part of the State is wide awake, at last, to the fact that the County Agents are as necessary to the rancher as a doctor to an invalid. And their ranches are showing the results.—But, I forgot to ask you: Have you eaten?"

He used the invitation formula that is universal in Northern California; where a man would no sooner think of letting a visitor,—rich or poor,—go hungry from his door than he would think of stealing that visitor's shoes.

"Yes," chimed in Dick, hospitality lifting him out of his treasure-trance, "have you eaten?"

"Well, no," said Romeyn, "I haven't. But——"

"But your wife's up Redding-way, and you're on your way back to an empty house and a cold kitchen range," interrupted Gale. "You're not going any farther till you've eaten. Supper's about ready, anyhow. Come in and I'll yell to Chang to put on an extra plate. We can tell you all you want to know about the barley, while we're feeding. Come along!"

He led the way into the living room; where he and Dick found themselves casting guilty glances, from time to time, at the locked table drawer as they chatted.

At supper, after the barley subject was exhausted, Dick O'Rell, aroused himself, with some effort, from a frowning revery, and turned abruptly to their guest.

"Romeyn," he said, avoiding his cousin's warning glance, "you say you were brought up in the Redding country. Know much about mining?"

The visitor laughed, patronizingly; swallowed a huge mouthful of food, tamped it down with a half-cup gulp of coffee, and made answer:

"Mining? Huh! It's my middle name. I reckon there's mighty few folks raised anywhere near Redding in the old days that didn't sop up some knowledge of mining with the first bath they ever took. Why, I worked for a couple of years in the Glastow mine and I did a lot of fool prospecting in Middle Creek; and I was pardners in the last claim that amounted to anything, up above Shasta Village. Yep, I served my turn at it, all right;—till I found out that the best way to yank gold out of California is with a plow and harrow; and not with a pick and a dynamite blast. That's why I turned rancher;—same as thousands of others. If I'd 'a' done it sooner I'd 'a' been a richer man, to-day."

He swallowed the rest of his coffee; and waved his cup at Chang in veiled intimation that he wanted it refilled. Then, laughing again, he went on:

"When I was thinking of buying that little ranch of mine, down below," he said, reminiscently, "I asked a comical chap, who used to own the next ranch to it, what chances he thought there was for a man to make a living by farming. 'Fine,' he says to me, when I

asked him that. 'Fine and el'gant. Here's how we fix it: The rancher borrows money of the bank, to get his start. Then if his crops pan out good, he pays it back. If the crops all fail, he can't pay it. So the bank loses out; and the loss comes back onto the depositors. And,' he says, 'that serves 'em right for putting their money into banks instead of into land and farm machinery,' he says. 'So you see, the rancher can't lose nothing, either way.' Of course," added Romeyn, in explanation, "of course I knew he was just poking fun at me; and that there must be a hole in his argument, somewheres. But even yet I get to thinking over what he said; and for the life of me I can't just see where——"

"In the early Nineties," broke in O'Rell, "when gold was shipped from the mines in Trinity County and Shasta County and thereabouts,—when it was shipped down to Redding, for instance,—did they mold it first into bricks,—say four by four by twelve inches,—and paint it black,—and——?"

"Who's been fooling you with yarns like that?" demanded Romeyn, in fine contempt. "Of course they didn't! Not that I ever heard of, at least," he qualified. "And I knew about most of the big shipments from up there. Why would they of took the trouble to do all that fancy stuff to the gold, when it was just going to be——?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," hastily intervened Barry, trying to find his garrulous cousin's toe, beneath the table, and stamp mercilessly on it, by way of signal. "Now, about that barley crop of ours: Here's a point

that may be of use to you in case you decide to plant that ten-acre corner of yours in——”

“Were you in or around Redding at the time of the Ruggles’ holdup?” recklessly interrupted O’Rell, leaning across the table and addressing the guest.

Barry shook in his shoes; and yearned morbidly to throw Dick out of the room on his head. But Romeyn took the question as a matter of course.

“Sure I was,” said he. “What’s more,—though I’m not boasting of it and it kept me awake some, for a few nights afterwards,—I was in the crowd at Redding when the Vigilanters strung up the three brothers to the big pine tree, not more’n two or three hours after they’d held up the stage over by Robbers’ Rock, on the Creek. Two of the Ruggleses were about my age. But the third was just a kid. He’d barely turned seventeen. The two older Ruggleses didn’t ask any mercy for themselves. But they begged, right pitiful, to have their kid brother let off. One of ’em even promised to tell where the gold was cached, if the Vigilanters would spare the youngster. But they wouldn’t hear to that, the Vigilanters wouldn’t. They was pretty riled and plenty determined to put a quick stop to the outdoor sport of robbing stages in that part of the State. So up they strung the whole three of ’em. . . . Say, where do you boys get your coffee? It’s first rate.”

He looked wistfully into his newly-emptied cup and then at Chang. The Chinaboy took the hint.

“Say,” exclaimed Romeyn, again, scarce pausing for breath, “I wonder did either of you read that piece in the *Sent’nel* about old Curly Enright saying the Rug-

gles booty was cached on a hill in Tehama County? I sure had to laugh when I read that piece," he ruminated, his beady gray eyes atwinkle.

"But why?" challenged Dick, once more eluding Gale's scowl. "What was there to laugh about? It——"

"Because it was so everlasting funny," explained Romeyn. "I knew Curly Enright, pretty well, in those days. He was a punkin-head and a blabber and a cut-up, even then. Just like he was when you boys knew him. (Not wanting to speak mean of a poor dead cuss.) I knew the two oldest Ruggles fellers, too, and I knew Tremaine. The Ruggleses were a pair of wise crooks. I leave it to you, would they trust a blabbing half-wit, like Curly Enright, to help 'em out in a robbery where silence and good sense was their one hope of not getting caught? Why, Curly would have spilt the whole story, first time he got drunk or first time he felt braggish. And they knew he would. They'd no sooner have taken him into that deal than they'd have printed a piece in the paper, beforehand, telling the public they was planning to hold up the stage.

"As for Tremaine, why, the Ruggleses hated that feller like he was poison. There'd been some sort of mixup about a girl he and one of the Ruggleses had wanted to marry. They hated each other like toad pie. Tremaine wouldn't have asked anything better than to betray 'em to the Sheriff. Is it likely, I ask you, that either Curly Enright or Tremaine would have been let to stand in on that robbery? Nope, it was Curly's last lie. Likewise his biggest. Besides, that myst'ry about

the hiding of the bullion was all settled up, years ago. Leastwise it was s'posed to be."

"Settled up?" repeated Dick, inquisitively. "I never heard that. How was it——?"

"Well, to begin with, the Ruggleses hadn't but two hours to hide the gold in, before they was caught. The gold was heavy. So it was figgered they couldn't have toted it far. And parties raked the hills and woods thereabouts with fine-tooth combs, looking for it. Of course, a reward was out. And the mine-folks had detectives to keep tabs on any one who might splurge into richness; and might show, that way, that they'd found the gold and kept the find a secret. Then, by and by, things sort of simmered down. And after that a fam'ly up on a butte not far from Middle Creek started prospecting on some hill-land they'd bought. And presently they struck a rich pocket. A pocket that netted 'em something above fifty thousand dollars. They smelted it down, themselves. Not another trace of gold was found anywhere near there, nor ever has been. So,—well, there wasn't any proof, but most folks put two and two together; and kind of decided that that fam'ly had happened on the Ruggleses' cache."

"I see," said O'Rell, dully.

And he relapsed into his former brooding silence; a silence so unnatural to the talkative youth that any one more observant than Romeyn must have noticed it.

The visitor stayed late, chatting aimlessly and oblivious of his hosts' abstraction. When he had gone, the two partners came back into the living room and

stood for a moment facing each other in silence. Then Barry said:

"Well, you heard his story. What do you think of it?"

"I—I don't know," said O'Rell, hesitatingly. "It all goes to show that the gold I found to-day is not the same gold the Ruggles brothers stole. And it goes to show that Enright lied. Yet Enright said the loot was hidden in a Tehama County hill; and we know he was always nosing about Gopher Hill. And on Gopher Hill I found this ingot," he continued, unlocking the drawer and laying the black bar on the table. "In other words, it can't possibly be. But it is. And that's the answer."

"Did you look for any more ingots, after you found this one?" asked Barry, again turning the bar over and studying its two scratches.

"It was getting dusk," said Dick, "and in the shadows of those manzanita bushes it was too dark to see plainly, any more. I looked, of course. And I'm going up there at dawn to-morrow to look again. But——"

"I'm going with you!" interpolated Barry.

"Good boy!" approved Dick. "You're a slow starter; but, once on the way, you're a willing little performer, all right. As I was telling you—I looked through all the ground about there, so far as I could see by such bum light. I went over it on my hands and knees; and got my best khaki shirt torn. As well as I was able to make out, this ingot here had been lying in a deep little hollow, at the edge of the thicket; with a

lot of rather loose dead leaves scattered over it. I felt all through the hollow,—it was a sort of natural trough of ground, about two feet wide and a foot deep and some six feet long and all choked with leaves and rubbish. I had stepped into it when my toe hit the sharp corner of the ingot. There wasn't——”

“Here’s the idea!” decided Barry. “That hollow was where the piled earth had sunk in, during all these years, above the hole where the ingots were buried. One of the ingots was nearer the surface than the others. And when the loose earth began to settle into a hollow, it fell away from this ingot and left it on the surface.”

“Sure!” agreed Dick. “The cache lies below that hollow, and this ingot was part of the Ruggles’ haul. Even though we’ve just proved there wasn’t any cache hereabouts and that the gold wasn’t in painted ingot form when it wasn’t buried there. It’s all as clear red as Sacramento River mud.”

“I didn’t say it was the Ruggles’ cache,” corrected Gale. “I meant only it was a cache of some sort. It must have been. For no one in his senses would have left this bar of gold lying around loose on the ground or in a hollow. To-morrow morning we’ll go up there, together, with a spade and a pick; and dig for the rest of it. I’m glad it’s on our own land and moderately out of the way from any chance of people happening in on us while we’re at work.”

“It seems to me,” mused O’Rell, “that I remember hearing a worthy man, no longer ago than last night, saying something about the folly of wasting time and

energy in following the will-o'-the-wisp, Gold, through California, when the real gold lies in crops. Of course, our good but windy friend, Romeyn, said something of the same sort, to-night at supper. But not so eloquently and at such elaborate length as——"

"I was right," admitted Gale. "Dead right. I know perfectly well I'm doing an idiotic thing, in going in with you on this treasure-hunt. I acknowledge that. But,—I'm going to do it, all the same."

"Hurroo for you!" applauded O'Rell. "We'll be two idiots, together. Two golden idiots. And now let's go to bed. We've got an early start to make. I suppose this ingot will be as safe in the table drawer as anywhere? Nobody can know it's here. And——"

Barry instinctively glanced toward the shutters, as Dick spoke. Subconsciously, O'Rell's query as to the safety of the gold bar had wakened conjectures as to nocturnal intruders. And these in turn had reminded him of the visitant of the preceding night. His eyes strayed swiftly to the shutter.

It was closed. Yet, as he looked, Gale fancied he saw its wooden surface tremble ever so little as if at the touch of something on its outer fastenings.

Not waiting for a second look, to determine whether he had really seen the shutter move or whether the almost imperceptible tremor of the wood was due to imagination, Barry was spurred by his taut nerves into instant action.

He darted to the window, in a single jump; and flung wide the shutters. His eyes, accustomed to the room's bright light, saw but a mass of murky black-

ness in front of him;—and—framed against this sable background,—the merest momentary flash of a blurred moon-white face.

From the whitish splash of face glowed the eyes he had seen on the night before. Luminous, huge, yet snakelike in their jet black malignant intensity, they met Barry's horrified gaze for the merest pulsebeat of time. Then, even before the swift vanishing of the indistinct blur of white face, the eyes were invisible.

Gale was aware of the same uncanny feeling that had seized him, on his former glimpse of those eyes;—of a queer little pringling along his scalp and spine;—of a vexing sensation that he had come into momentary touch with the supernatural, the occult.

For perhaps a second, he stood, staring out into the dense blackness, trying to trace the vanishing interloper and to steady his own wrenched nerves.

Then upon his ear smote, soft yet distinct, the pad-pad-pad of fast running feet; drawing farther away from the window at every step. There was nothing supernatural about this sound. It betokened nothing except a very strong desire on the trespasser's part to get himself out of the way of pursuit as fast as he could.

Barry, with a start, came to himself; his brain alert, his nerves steady, a gust of wholesome wrath replacing his second of dismay.

"Roy!" he shouted, summoning the collie who had roused himself from a nap at sound of the opening shutters. "Roy! *After him! Get him!*"

As he yelled the command, Barry Gale leaped bodily

through the low window-casement, into the yard below. The collie needed no further instructions or example. Even as he rushed to the window Roy heard the sound of running feet. And he knew what his master required of him. With a wild beast snarl of eagerness, the dog made a flying leap through the window, close at Barry's heels.

O'Rell, wholly at sea as to the meaning of this spectacular double exit from the room, nevertheless saw there was a chase afoot and that his staid cousin would not have acted as he did without powerful reason. And Dick ran excitedly to the window in the wake of the other two.

A fitful breeze swept in through the opened casement, making the table lamp flicker and flare high. O'Rell had a mortal dread of fire,—a dread shared by every rancher whose house and farm-buildings are but newly paid for. To make certain the erratically burning lamp should not explode from these wind puffs, in his absence, he blew out the light as he passed the table. Then, groping his way to the window, he climbed out and dropped to the ground.

Meantime, Barry Gale had made a dash in the general direction of the padding footsteps he had heard. And, running through the darkness he proceeded to collide with one of the pecan trees in the dooryard.

The collision all-but knocked the breath out of him. He came to a scrambling halt, his arms instinctively flung about the tree-trunk, the skin of his nose barked by the contact.

And it was then he noticed the pad-pad-pad of run-

ning feet had ceased. The night, too, was close-clouded. The darkness seemed to press against his eyeballs, like a black bandage. Somewhere, close to him, was the man who twice had spied upon him;—the man whose strange eyes had haunted him, off and on, all day.

Not ten seconds had elapsed since he had seen the blurred face, at the shutter. Not five seconds had elapsed since he had given tumultuous chase. The fellow could not have gone far. In his own helplessness as a tracker, Barry turned to the collie.

Roy had followed his master through the casement and out into the dooryard. Having had no definite orders as to what or whom he should pursue, he was now dancing frenziedly around Gale.

Barry, summoning the dog to follow, ran back to the window. He pointed to the ground beneath the house wall. Though he himself could see nothing down there in the darkness, he knew a dog's vision,—though much more nearsighted by day than a human's,—is more clear by night than any man's.

He knew there must be footmarks there; and that Roy could not only see them, but,—what was far more important,—could catch their scent. Pointing downward, he called to the collie:

"Track him, Roy! Get him!"

The collie sniffed interestedly at the earth, dancing on his white little toes and whimpering with eagerness. In an instant he had caught the intruder's scent and was on the trail.

By the time Dick O'Rell had blown out the lamp and had clambered down through the window, to the

ground, Roy was off, at a hard gallop. Nose to earth, lips drawn back from his curving white fangs, the collie sped along the fresh trail, in easy bounds which carried him swiftly ahead of the two blindly-following men.

Gale heard the eager patter of his flying feet as Roy sped on through the thick darkness; hot on the scent of the man he had been told to "get."

Following at a lumbering and groping pace, Barry smiled grimly at thought of what must happen. He knew no mortal man, be he ever so fleet, can run one half as fast as a pursuing collie. He knew, too, that the dog's keen night-vision would enable him to avoid all obstacles and to keep a faster and straighter line than his prey.

Gale strained his ears for the inevitable clash between pursuer and pursued. He visualized, in his mind, the futile run of the man who had had a bare quarter-minute start on the dog;—the unerring flight of the collie;—the sudden spring upon the fugitive's shoulders and the dragging down of the escaping trespasser. The thought lent wings to his own groping feet.

Close behind him, swearing fluently and sputtering a score of questions as to the reason for this sudden inexplicable behavior on the part of Barry and Roy, trotted Dick O'Rell. Gale was too busy listening for the attack on the invisible fugitive to answer any of his chum's queries or to pay heed to aught except the fever of the chase.

The pursuit, in all probability, occupied only a very few seconds. Yet to both partners it seemed a century

long; there in the dark, as they stumbled over familiar objects and collided with young trees of their own planting.

Then came the end.

Roy's fast-scurrying footsteps, fifty yards ahead of them, ceased, abruptly. Followed a gurgle, a snort of hurt and utter astonishment; and then a scream of pain.

As he lunged forward to the spot whence issued the noise, Barry had scope to note that the scream was not that born in any human throat. It was a beast-yell. And again that odd thrill of contact with the supernatural swept through him.

The scream was repeated; and with it now came a sound of tumbling and of thrashing about on the ground. There was no mistaking the direction. And both men put on a fresh burst of speed.

"He's got him, all right!" panted Barry, as they raced, neck-and-neck.

"Who's got what?" puffed O'Rell, wholly at a loss to understand any detail of the affair. "What's the answer? The thing Roy has caught up with must be a mountain lion, from the ungodly sounds it's making. It's no *man*!"

They rounded a clump of spindly lilac, at top speed; and reached the scene of commotion. Still, they could see nothing. But, at their very feet, something or some one was rolling and gasping furiously in the dust; and once again arose that scream of mortal agony.

Barry Gale, without more ado, plunged forward into the fracas. He plunged as might a football tackle; his arms flung out to grasp the foe. But his snatching

fingers encountered only a mass of squirming fur, that writhed and twisted frantically under his hold.

O'Rell, less prone to rush into physical danger, had adopted a safer and perhaps wiser course. In the hurry of bolting from the house, neither man had paused to snatch up one of the flashlights which always lay ready on the hall-table. In the absence of such an aid, O'Rell, as he ran, had drawn forth his matchbox. The instant he checked his run, he had taken out a match and struck it.

Shielding the point of fire with both hands, lest the wind extinguish it, he lifted the lighted match high and stared down at the sight its feeble glow revealed to him.

On the ground was Barry Gale, clutching foolishly at Roy. The collie was rolling about in dire anguish; —crazed by pain. There was no other living figure visible within the narrow radius of the match-flare.

"Get up!" ordered Dick, in bewilderment. "That's your own dog you're manhandling. There's no one else here."

Barry saw, at the same time, that his mysterious opponent on the ground was Roy; and that the man Roy had been pursuing was clean gone. He started to rise to his feet. As he did so, he broke into a spasm of sneezing. And his eyes burned as from a thousand red hot needles.

Getting up, he gouged his fists into his agonized eyelids and broke into a fresh sneezing fit. Roy, seeming to realize that his master was once more with him, staggered drunkenly to his feet, and reeled blindly

toward the loud-sneezing Gale. O'Rell looked on in growing amazement.

"What in blue blazes——" he began.

Then, as the dog shook himself violently, Dick sneezed and dug with his free hand at his own eyes.

"Not blue blazes, at all!" he sneezed. "It's *red* blazes! Cayenne pepper. Bushels of it! I know, because I got it in my eyes, once, when I was a kid. There's nothing else just like it. I——"

He relapsed into another sneezing-fit, and let the expiring match go out. Barry cleared his eyes of the fiery particles, as best he could; and sopped at them with his handkerchief.

Just then he chanced to glance tearily toward the house. A faint light was coming into view from an upper window; the window of the room occupied by Chang. The Chinaboy, apparently, had been awakened by the din at the far end of the dooryard, and was lighting his candle.

"Chang!" shouted Gale. "Come out here, on the run; and bring along a couple of flashlights from the hall! Jump!"

While O'Rell was seeking to silence his own sneezes and to strike another match,—while Barry was reaching for the anguished dog that rubbed moaningly against his knees for help,—they heard Chang clatter down the short stairs. The next second the Chinaboy, scantily clad and carrying a white blazing flashlight in each yellow hand, came trotting out of the house toward them. Barry took the lights from him, commanding:

"Hustle back to the kitchen and get some warm water ready, with a little witch-hazel in it. Get some soft cloths, too. We'll be right there. Don't stop to ask questions! Chase!"

With the stolidity of his race and class, where the mad eccentricities of "foreign devils" are concerned, Chang glanced pityingly down at the tortured dog, then in mild wonder at the red and streaming eyes of the two sneezing men; and trotted obediently back to the house on his errand of first aid.

Gale flashed his light upon the bit of tumbled earth where the dog had been rolling. The rays played along a narrow line of darker saffron on the yellow earth.

"Get the idea?" he asked Dick, pointing at the line. "It was an old trick of runaway slaves when the bloodhounds were set after them. This tramp or thief, who was standing outside the living room window, to-night, came prepared for everything. After last night's visit he found we keep a dog;—a dog with the pluck and the nose to trail an intruder. So he brought along a bag of cayenne pepper. When he was chased, he sprinkled a thick line of it along his own track. Roy got to this place, with his nose close to the ground; sniffing with all his might. And he sniffed his nostrils full of pepper;—of red blazes, as you called it. His nostrils and his throat and his eyes, too. A dog's nostrils are the most sensitive part of him. Roy must have felt as you or I would if molten lead had been poured into our noses and mouths. It put him out of business; as it used to put out the bloodhounds, in slave days."

As he talked, Gale had set his light on the ground; and was working with his handkerchief and fingers over the tormented dog. Roy,—silent now, after the first unbearable agony of his experience with the red pepper,—submitted tremblingly and gratefully to his master's skilled ministrations.

"Poor old puppy!" consoled Barry. "You'll be able to see again, before long. The worst of it happened when you rolled over. That got it in your hair and eyes;—and into ours, too. You kicked up an awful dust. Warm water and witch-hazel will fix you, all right."

He stooped and picked up the collie in his arms, to carry him to the kitchen. And then he noted for the first time that O'Rell, flashlight in hand, was going over the ground, to either side of the pepper-line.

"Here's a funny thing!" commented Dick, in noisy perplexity, as he came back from his examination. "Look along here,—the direction we came from;—the direction the man came from, that Roy was after. See those big brogan marks in the soft ground? That's where he ran. Those are the same marks we saw under the window, last night, you'll remember."

"Yes," assented Barry, as he started toward the house, bearing the suffering dog tenderly in his arms. "I know. Same man both times. I knew that, anyway. I saw his eyes again, to-night. I saw the shutter shake, just a tiny bit, as you and I were jawing, in there. I jumped to the window and——"

"Yes, yes!" interposed O'Rell, impatiently. "But get this idea, before you go in. See those brogan-

prints? They run straight up to this line of pepper. There they stop. They STOP! The ground is just as soft there as anywhere else. But the footprints stop! Look for yourself."

Gale followed the play of the strong flashlight along the ground. Out of the gloom, from toward the house, showed the distinct marks of running feet, in the dirt; —the imprint of heavy brogans, striking deepest in earth where the runner's toes had dug for purchase in the silty soil.

Up to the line of red pepper extended the footmarks, and a single short stride beyond it. There they vanished. There was no tree nearby, which the fugitive could have climbed. There were no marks as of a waiting vehicle or horse which he might have mounted. In the center of a stretch of soft open ground the footprints had disappeared.

Puzzled, the two men cast about the spot for twenty yards in every direction. But nowhere did the brogan-marks show, again. Marveling, they went at last to the house, entering through the kitchen door.

There, Chang had ready for them the warm water and cloths and witch-hazel. For ten minutes, Gale wrought over the injured collie. When Roy could once more see and when the anguish in his nostrils had abated somewhat, they made him a bed of rags, beside the range, and left him for the night.

Then, still talking perplexedly of the last hour's happenings, Gale and O'Rell fared back to the living room. Dick tried the door. Then he rattled the knob more

determinedly. After which, turning to Barry with a bothered frown, he exclaimed:

"The door's locked! Locked from the inside! What the deuce do you make of that? I shut it behind us when we went in there, before. But I'll swear I didn't lock it. It's—it's been locked since we dived out through the window."

"It couldn't have been!" denied Barry, taking a turn at the resisting knob. "There was nobody in the house, but ourselves and Chang. And Chang was nowhere near this part of the ground floor. Nobody——"

"We left the ingot lying out on the table!" cried O'Rell in sudden dismayed recollection. "And now the door's locked against us!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

BARRY GALE'S answer to his cousin's stammered words took the form of instant and violent action. Throwing all his weight into the blow,—and barking his knuckles liberally in the impact,—he drove his right fist against the upper panel of the door, next to the knob.

The stout wood split from bottom to top; but the panel itself held. Even as Gale struck, Dick O'Rell dashed down the hall and out of the front door.

"I can get around to the window, quicker than you can hammer that door in!" he called as he ran. "And if any one's still in there——"

His voice was lost in the clatter of his own feet as he took the veranda steps at a bound, and scurried around the side of the house, toward the living room window.

Gale, meanwhile, regardless of barked knuckles and of jarred arm-muscles, smote again with full force upon the door. The split panel caved in, under the whalebone-and-iron impetus of this second blow. In two pieces it clattered to the floor, inside.

Barry thrust his arm into the unlighted room, feeling for the key. His fingertips closed about it. Whoever had locked the door had not troubled to remove the key. With a single twist, Barry turned it and swung open the maltreated door.

As he did so, he sent a flare from his flashlight through the dark space in front of him. The room was empty; though a man's head and shoulders showed at the open window. At this apparition, Barry made a bull rush.

But he checked his charge, halfway, with a grin of self-contempt at the trick his overwrought nerves had played on him. For, as his flashlight now revealed, the man climbing in through the window was Dick O'Rell.

Turning aside, Barry struck a match and lighted the lamp, whose chimney was still uncomfortably warm. His eyes and O'Rell's were sweeping the room. To all outward appearance, it was undisturbed by the mysterious visitor who had entered it and had locked the door from within and had then departed,—all in the brief space of their own absence from the house.

"Came in by the window," mused the wondering O'Rell, "crossed the room, locked the door and then crawled out of the window again, without mussing up anything here! Funny sort of Smart Alec stunt for a midnight prowler to play! He must be the original Village Cut-up. Or——"

His bewildered speech ended in a grunt of dismay. His questing gaze had lighted on the table. And, at the same moment, Barry's own glance was riveted there.

"The ingot!" babbled Dick, aghast. "It's gone! Gone!"

"Yes," acquiesced Gale, with a forced calmness. "It's gone. So I see. The 'Smart Alec' wasn't such a brainless Village Cut-up, after all. He took a big

chance. But the stake was worth it. That bar of gold weighed several pounds. Figure out the value of gold per pound Troy; and you can estimate his haul."

"But," blithered Dick, dumbfounded, "but,—but it can't be. It *can't*! I put out the light, in here, when I followed you through the window after that hobo or whatever he was. The gold bar was on the table, right here under the lamp. I saw it, as I blew the lamp out. No one coming past in our absence could have peeked in and seen it. For the room was pitch black. Yet——"

"Yet some one *did* come in and get it; and make safe from intrusion by locking the only door leading in here from the hall," supplemented Gale. "We know that. It couldn't well have been the chap with the queer big eyes. For he wouldn't be likely to stop in his run, after sprinkling the pepper; and risk being caught by coming back to the house. Sneak thieves and second story men don't go back to continue their work, after a household has been all roused and when every one's on the watch for them."

"Then there were two of the yeggs," declared Dick. "That's the answer. There were two of them. They had been looking in, through a crack in the shutter. You scared them off by opening the shutter. One of them bolted; and you and Roy made after him. The other waited till the coast was clear; and then climbed in here and swiped the ingot. That's the solution!"

And Dick O'Rell looked as proud as might Sherlock Holmes at the point of the story where the great detective usually says: "My dear Watson, the police as

usual will get the credit." But Barry shook his head.

"No," he contradicted, after a moment of puckered-brow cogitation. "No, there weren't two of them. There couldn't have been."

"How do you figure that?" queried O'Rell, annoyed at the lack of impression made by his brilliant deduction. "How do you figure——?"

"I figure it by Roy," said Gale, simply. "He jumped out of the window with me. I told him to pick up the trail. The instant I brought him back here to the window, he picked it up, without the very least hesitation. If there had been two trails, he would have hesitated; or he would have come back to me for instructions. He did neither. He hit the trail—the only trail—and he set off on it, at full speed. He never swerved once from it, till he ran into that line of cayenne. No, there was only one fellow. He——"

"You said just now," protested Dick, still ruffled, "that it couldn't well have been the fellow you chased; and that he wouldn't be likely to double on his trail and come back to the house, after the whole lot of us were on guard. Yet here you say there couldn't have been two of them."

"There couldn't," insisted Barry. "The man who got in here, after the ingot, must have come while we were out in the yard with Roy, or else while we were in the kitchen, afterward. He may have happened along and heard me call to Chang to warm some water in the kitchen. He'd have known, then, that we were outside and that Chang was in the kitchen and that the living room would be empty."

"Even so," growled Dick, "that doesn't make as much sense as my theory. Why would any panhandler or crook take such a big chance of capture, just for the sake of being alone in our living room for two minutes? Why?"

For answer, Barry pointed to the bare spot on the table, where the ingot had lain.

"Sure!" scoffed Dick. "Only, if he came here, after the lamp was out, how could he have known the gold was in this room? How could he have known there was anything in here worth stealing? How could he? The room was dark. So he couldn't possibly have looked in and seen it. And the contents of two bachelor ranchers' living room aren't apt to be valuable enough to warrant a crook in risking arrest by making a touch-and-go two-minute visit to it, when every one in the house is awake and on edge. Besides," with new excitement, as he crossed over to the casement and bent his head to a level with the sill, "from the window, at this height, he couldn't have seen the ingot lying on the table, even if he'd turned a flashlight into the room. That file-stand of government reports is square between the window and the table. Any one who had been peeking in, beforehand, could have seen me pick up the ingot,—as I did, you remember,—and look at it again and then lay it down. He could have seen that over the top of the file. And he could have seen me lay it down and guessed where I laid it. Or he could even have heard us talking about it, and he could have come in then and looked for it. But it's a cinch nobody, coming here while we were out, could have

thought of searching this room for a bar of gold or for anything else of value."

"And," countered Barry, "it's a cinch the same man we chased would never have taken the fifty-to-one chance of coming back here while we were still looking for him. Which brings us to where we started. The ingot is gone. You found it in an impossible place. And it has vanished in a still more impossible way. I'm going to bed. At least I'm going there, after I go out to the fold. And I'm in on that daybreak treasure hunt of yours, remember. Good night."

Picking up his electric torch, he left the room by way of the window. Letting himself cautiously down to the ground, he played the strong white electric light upon the earth below the window. There, plainly visible, were the heavy brogan marks he had seen on both sides of the pepper trail.

Near them, but approaching the window from a different angle, were a second set of footprints. A more scrutinizing study showed Barry that these were made by the same brogans as the first pair. They came straight up to the house; and, close together, pressed a fraction deeper into the mold, just beneath the casement. Here, evidently, the man had stood, as he put his hands on the sill and drove his toes into the ground for a jump upward.

Here, a yard away, were two gouging heelprints, close together, to mark where he had leaped down to earth after his rifling of the room. Barry flashed his light in front of these, for several yards. But he could find no further marks going in that direction; nor,

from that spot, in any other. The man had sprung heavily down to the ground and then, it seemed, had vanished into air, as he had apparently done when he came to the pepper-line.

Barry called over his shoulder:

"You win, Dick. At least, I lose. There was only one man; I was right about that. But he *did* come back. At least,—he came back on foot and went away again on wings."

Barry had spoken in a low tone. Now, walking as silently as possible, he made his way to the sheepfold. Halfway thither he took off his puttees and boots; and proceeded, the rest of the journey, on noiseless stockinged feet.

He circled the fold, where a shuffling and a sleepy tinkle alone broke the silence. And he stepped into the lean-to hut where Toni slept.

Zit, the dwarfish black collie lay athwart the door. He looked up, at Barry's approach; and wagged his tail. For he had recognized the master's soundless step and knew there was no occasion to give the alarm on Gale's approach.

Patting the friendly little fellow, and stepping over him, Barry crept into the hut and to the pallet on which Toni sprawled. Guided by his knowledge of the room's topography, Gale reached the pallet without disturbing the Basco. His sensitive fingertips ran lightly over the sleeper's throat and hairy chest. They rested at last above the heart. There they remained for a few seconds.

Then, as noiselessly as he had entered, Gale stole out of the leanto and back toward the house.

"Pulse under seventy," he muttered to himself, "and as steady as a pendulum. That's not the heart action of a man who has just taken a long chance and nabbed more than a thousand dollars' worth of gold. Toni, for one, comes through, clean."

Any one who has had long dealings with Chinese servants will understand why it did not occur to either partner to suspect Chang of the theft. Apart from which, both would have realized the Chinaboy had had neither time nor opportunity to commit the robbery.

As for the little handful of day laborers who slept in the barracks,—they were quartered nearly half a mile from the house and had had a heavy day's work. Moreover, all of them knew there was not, as a rule, anything in the shabbily furnished ranch house worth the risk of stealing. Nor, as Gale now pondered, would Roy have followed so ferociously a trail as familiar to him as that of any one employed around the ranch.

At dawn,—after a sleepless night of brain-wearying conjecture,—Barry plunged into an ice-cold tub; rubbed himself down till he tingled from head to foot; clambered into his clothes and hurried out into the dining room to join O'Rell in a nervously-gobbled breakfast.

Neither partner was hungry. In the veins of both coursed a swirling excitement;—the fever of the gold-quest. As quickly as they could, they finished the bare meal and left the house. Gale carried a pick, elabor-

ately hidden under the slicker he had donned for this same purpose of concealment. O'Rell's slicker hid a spade.

Thus, raincoat-clad, in face of what promised to be a dazzlingly rainless day, they set forth with furtive haste upon the mile trudge to Gopher Hill.

The sun had not risen. But, back of Tuscan Peaks and of Mount Lassen beyond, the sky was deepening from delicate rose-color into flame. Everywhere, the birds were singing. Dew shone from leaf and blade. The spice of life and vigor vibrated in the sharply bracing early morning air. Nature was waking; in all the matchless glory of a Northern California sunrise.

Barry Gale drew in great deep breaths of the invigorating air. It cleansed from his worried brain the mists of perplexity and of gold lust. He reveled in the wonder and beauty of it all; as his eyes roved proudly over the double wall of mighty mountains which stretched out like sleeping kings; brooding over the glorious valley between and beneath them;—the valley Gale had learned to love.

Barry's gaze shifted to northward. There, such a little distance from him, in that huddle of hills and ravines beyond Iron Canyon, was hidden a squat gray stone house. And in that house was sleeping the One Girl!

Of old he had been wont to watch the sun rise behind Lassen's snowcrest; and to remember, in shamed sentimentalism, that, a few short hours earlier it had risen over Maida's own Eastern home. And now the same sun was shining on them both. The same lovely

valley was housing him and the woman for whom his heart had been yearning so long and so bitterly.

The realization brought back to him the memory of the note he had received from Wolfe Naylor, the preceding evening;—a memory which the night's later events had for a time wiped out. He was to have gone riding with her this morning,—and what a God-given morning for a ride!—but now, as soon as he should return home from this wild-goose chase for treasure, he must telephone her, explaining why he could not keep the appointment. He frowned; and the glory of the sunrise seemed momentarily clouded.

“Look at Lassen!” said O'Rell, breaking the long silence between them. “See how the vapor curls and eddies over it? That's the way the Old Lady looked, just before the last eruption. Remember? And, last night, when I was turning in, I happened to look out of the window, in that direction. And there was a yellowish pink tinge of light on the bottom part of that bunch of cloud over the crater. Shouldn't wonder if the eruption would be a reg'lar old he-one, when it comes.”

“They're always going to be reg'lar old he-ones, when they come,” said Barry, idly, “but somehow they never are.”

“No?” queried Dick, as he stopped and picked up from the rubble at their feet a squarish particle of coal-like black rock. “Then how about this? And how about those acres of whopping big flat-sided black boulders, up Iron Canyon way? Where'd they come from? How do those springs, down by the first site

they chose for the Iron Canyon Dam, happen to be almost lukewarm, even in winter, and to smell of sulphur? Hey?"

"Oh, it's volcanic country, all right," agreed Barry. "And there have been eruptions of Lassen that tore the earth to shreds for miles around; and covered the land in every direction with volcanic rock; and split mile-deep fissures in the ground, and broke hills in half, and all that. But it was hundreds of years ago. It could never happen again."

"When my dad was down at Washington, back in the early Seventies," said Dick, "with a petition for universal military training, the Senate Committee turned down the petition; on the ground that we'd learned in the Civil War the uselessness of warfare and that '*it could never happen again.*' Anything can 'happen again,' in this miracle State; where every plain over a mile wide is a valley, and every plain under a mile wide is a canyon. There's the manzanita clump, up there, on the shoulder of the hill!" he broke off. "The clump where I found the ingot."

They had passed out of the level valley and had been for some minutes breasting the high ground above their pasture lands. Now, they were mounting the lowest slopes of Gopher Hill, itself.

And, at sight of their goal, they ceased from talk and from all thought save that of the treasure-hunt. Shoulders down, feet gripping the steep and rubbly surface, they thrust their way up the brush-cluttered hill.

In Barry's heart,—as they neared the clump of

straggly manzanitas with their rank-scented red stems and dark foliage,—hammered away an irrepressible excitement. Once more, he was under the black magic of the gold-lure; gripped by it to the exclusion of all else.

Now, shoulder to shoulder, they were plowing their way through the manzanita clump. At the far edge, O'Rell halted, glanced around him as if taking his bearings; and then moved a rod or so to eastward along the thicket's margin.

Here he came to a stop once more, while Barry watched him with the fidgety eagerness of a dog that waits for its master to throw a stick for retrieving. Scratching his head, O'Rell peered about him; making one or two little exploratory forays along the copse edge.

Then, dropping to his knees in the outer fringe of the thicket, he crept along thus for another two yards; and exclaimed aloud in triumph.

"Here we are!" he exulted. "Yesterday I came upon it from the other end; so I got tangled up, for a minute, just now. Look!"

Barry was on his knees beside him; as tensely stirred and athrill as Dick, himself. O'Rell had parted the red stalks of two bushes and brought to view a narrow trough on the surface of the stony hill; a trough choked wellnigh to ground-level with dead leaves and twigs and other rubbish.

"You're a methodical chap!" commented Gale; speaking lightly, to minimize his own keen suspense. "When you told me you had found that ingot in there

and burrowed around for more, I didn't imagine you had taken the bother to put back all the débris again, just as you found it. And with a cobweb spun across it, too."

Dick O'Rell paused, as he was about to clear away the stuff which choked the trough. He stared down in dull astonishment at the spot.

"I—I didn't put the litter back again," he said, confusedly. "I left it scattered all over the shop. I cleaned out the trough, to the bottom, on the idea there might be more ingots hidden there. I remembered the place where the trough was, by its position, and mostly by the little double boulder at one side of it. It looked like a pocket edition of Tuscan Peaks. It was a glimpse of the same boulder, just now, that made me know I'd found the place again. I——"

"If you mean that little gray rock behind you," cut in Gale, "it hasn't a double peak at all. It's just a dumpy little dornick."

Dick whirled about and stared at the stone.

"Why," he stuttered. "Why, so it it!—I only got a glimpse at it, as we came in here. I supposed it was the same one. I——"

"There are hundreds of stones all around here, deep bedded and cropping out, everywhere," said Barry. "You've picked the wrong one. There are dozens of places where old-time eruptions and earthquakes made little troughs in the ground, too. It's only natural there should be rocks near more than one of them. You'll have to start your search, all over, for the particular trough you found yesterday."

He was irritated;—and vexed at his own irritation. A blunder or delay at the acme of such excitement as his was bound to demand toll of the temper.

“Let’s look farther,” he suggested, trying to remember that Dick was as disappointed as he; and to speak pleasantly. “We’ll go around to the place where you came through the thicket, yesterday, and begin our search from there.”

“This trough is just like the one yesterday,” O’Rell was muttering, undecidedly. “And what I took for a two-peaked rock may have been this stone and the smaller one just behind it. Though I don’t quite see how it could have been,” he added, “for I made a pretty close examination of all the landmarks I could find. Still——”

Experimentally, he thrust his fingers down into the shallow hole. With a gasp, he jerked them out again as if they had encountered a snake.

And, in his clenched hand was a black-coated bar of gold!

Barry Gale fairly choked with amazement, as Dick flourished the ingot in front of his blankly bewildered face.

“Same place!” chortled O’Rell, hysterical in his jubilation. “Same place! Same ingot! Can’t be! But it IS!”

He scrambled to his feet, and did a sprawling war dance, brandishing the bar aloft. Barry, with bulging eyes, looked on.

“Stuck my hand down there, just for no reason at all!” sang O’Rell. “And, first thing it touched was

this! What do you say now about little Cousin Dicky's genius as a goldfinder?"

"I—I say," answered Gale, confusedly, "I say that either we're crazy or else the man who stole this from us is crazy! To put the thing back in the place it was taken from! No man with his wits would have done it, Dick! He must have put it here, in the first place. Then he got it away from us. He brought it back here. He saw you'd cleaned out the trough. And in spite of all that, he puts the ingot in the very place you were bound to visit again, and scoops some fresh rubbish over it! What rank, unbelievable idiocy!"

"Let him keep on being an idiot!" exulted Dick. "It's all cash in our pockets! He can steal our gold every night, if he likes; so long as he'll put it carefully back here, next day. Maybe he isn't a human at all. Maybe he's the goose that lays the golden ingots; and this is his nest. When winter comes, we'll pile up some ground green bone and some hot mash, near here; to make him lay all season."

A sudden odd fancy struck Gale. Taking the bar from his cousin, he fell to examining it. Then he handed it back again.

"Look that over, carefully," said he. "You remember the two deep scratches you made in it, last night? Well, they aren't there! This isn't the ingot you found, yesterday. It's another one. See? That paint hasn't been scratched, anywhere. And there's no extra thick daub on it anywhere, as there would be if the scratches had been painted over. That deepest cut you made, was a real furrow in the gold. There's no

furrow in this one. All the sides are smooth. Look."

With dropping jaw, Dick O'Rell turned the ingot over and over, squinting closely at all its unscratched planes. Then he looked up, in crass bewilderment, at the equally bewildered Gale.

"What in blue blazes do you make of it all?" he whispered, a touch of awe in his jolly voice.

"I—I don't make anything of it!" returned Barry, dully. "I don't make anything of any of the crazy things that have been happening lately. It's all upside down and impossible!"

With a vigorous shake of his wide shoulders, he pulled himself together.

"Since we're in a dream," said he, "let's turn it from a silly nightmare into a golden dream. The ingot is here. Or one just like it. We came up on the hill to look for gold. Here's where we decided the cache must be; because one of the ingots was washed to the surface; and——"

"And now one more," amended Dick.

"And," pursued Barry, "here's where we are going to begin digging!"

He took off his slicker and rolled up his sleeves. Then, lifting the pick he had dropped, he advanced toward the trough. O'Rell, following his example, laid down the ingot with much tender care; slipped out of his slicker and gripped his spade.

"Here's where we get more wealth," he prophesied, "than the old ranch would yield us in ten years."

"And," pessimistically added Barry, "more trouble, perhaps, than the ranch would yield us in a century.

What was that?" he broke off, pick in air; as a sound caught his alert ear.

Involuntarily crouching, both men peered forth through the thin fringe of manzanita. In the direction whence they had come, there was no sign of life; except where, in the distance and far below them, Toni was driving forth his restless gray-white billows of sheep from the fold, toward the grazing ground. The shepherd loomed up gigantic and with a forty foot black shadow trailing behind him as he strode forward into the sunrise. Zit, a whizzing dark smudge, in the distance, was galloping and dodging,—in a dozen places at once,—keeping the regiment of sheep intact and moving in the desired line.

To eastward, the sun was butting his fiery way through a dun mist of volcanic smoke, above the crest of Lassen. The long golden North California day had begun.

To the northeast, and just below the hill-shoulder where crouched the two treasure hunters, dipped the precipitate gorge with its blackened walls and its cliff-clusters of poison oak; and with the turbid yellow Sacramento River crawling through its center;—the deep and wide and magnificently sinister gorge known to the Tehama County folk as "Iron Canyon."

Here, for years, it had been planned to dam the gorge and to use the mighty volume of back-up river water to irrigate five of the Sacramento Valley's richest counties. Now that the government had at last decided to interest itself more vitally in the huge irrigation scheme, one party of surveyors after another had

been at work at various points along the canyon, depriving the gloomily beautiful area of its olden stark solitude.

The sound that had caught Barry's keenly listening ear was the clank of a light chain; followed by a human voice and the tread of several pairs of approaching feet.

Now, as he and O'Rell listened, the steps came yet nearer; clambering along the canyon-lip and dislodging tiny avalanches of stones and rubble.

Dick peered cautiously out through the fringe of branches. Then he grunted in disgust and turned back toward his cousin. The tread had ceased. But a light, high-pitched voice was calling some order.

"A bunch of four surveyors!" grumbled O'Rell. "They've rigged up their theodolite,—or whatever they call the thing that would be a camera if it had a bigger box on top of it. They've rigged it up, right down there across the dip from us. I could hit it with a stone, two tries out of three, it's so near. And one of 'em's gone on, a hundred yards or so; and he's standing there, wigwagging the chap at the tripod. And another fellow with a chain and——"

"That means they're here or hereabouts for the next half-day or more!" fumed Barry. "And the first pick stroke will be heard by every one of them. Then, when they see us at work up here, it's a thousand to one they'll stroll over and see what we're up to. The treasure quest is off for the day, Dick, old man. Can't you see it is?"

Dick O'Rell swore, softly, but fervently.

"Can't we shoo them away, or something?" he muttered.

Then, without even waiting for an answer to his senseless query, he began to roll up his slicker and to roll down his sleeves.

"We may as well hide the spade and the pick, up here, somewhere," suggested Barry. "No use to lug them back and forth every time we come to the hill. Let's put them safe away under some of this rubbish. And," he added, reprovingly, "let's locate them a bit more sanely than you marked the trough where we found the ingot. No use wasting half an hour, each time we come up, looking for the tools. How's this?"

He thrust the spade and pick, side by side, in a deep niche between two manzanita roots and brushed handfuls of mold and leaves and twigs over them.

"Now, then," he went on, as he made mental mark of the spot and of the adjacent landmarks, "I could find these in the dark."

"How about this ingot?" asked O'Rell. "Are we going to take it back to the house or bury it safely somewhere out here?"

Barry pondered. Then he said:

"If we take it home, the man who hid it and the other ingot here will be sure to think we've got it. That is, if such a congenital idiot ever does any thinking at all. If he shows the same mixture of luck and cunning he displayed last night, he'll not only look for it at the house, but he'll stand a fair chance of getting it, wherever it's hidden. I vote for burying it, out here, somewhere in this clump. Not sticking it

in a trough, but burying it;—deep and safe; and marking the spot in some way that we'll recognize and no one else will. Then, when we find the other ingots,—if there are really any more of them,—we can decide on a better place to bury the whole lot of them; nearer the house. What do you say?"

"Sounds good to me!" eagerly agreed Dick. "Let's make a Treasure Island chart of the place where we bury this," he went on, boyishly. "Red cross indicates spot where gold bar is buried. Ten points N.E. from Blasted Oak, nine steps S.W. from Hangman's Rock. Drop Gold Bug through Eye of Skull on a rainy but sunshiny midnight. All that sort of thing."

Barry drew out the spade. Silently he dug a trench, a foot deep and about as long, in the rocky earth between the bush stems. With his knife he cut away such of the red roots as impeded his digging. Into this receptacle he laid the black bar.

Covering it, to the surface of the ground, with the displaced earth, he dislodged with his spade a fifty-pound rock that was but lightly imbedded in the ground. This he rolled over upon the filled trench. Along all its edges he strewed leaves and mold. Then scraping away all traces of loose earth, he threw an armful of dead branches and twigs carelessly across the rock. After which, taking out pencil and account book, he jotted down the topography.

"There!" he said, as Dick gazed in warm approval at the clever bit of interring. "That's where we can lay hands on it in a minute. And not a soul on earth will suspect that rock hasn't been where it is, for the

past million years. Fill up the trough where we found the ingot, will you? Make it look as undisturbed as you can. So! Now, let's get back home."

First reconnoitering carefully, and making certain no one was in sight or could possibly have seen them, the two crept back through the thicket, the way they had come; keeping the clump of bushes always between themselves and the party of surveyors.

As they reached the foot of the hill, Dick spoke.

"Well," he said, philosophically, "it isn't the two hours of unalloyed gold digging I had planned for us. But, anyhow, we got a bite before we even baited our hooks. Mighty few Argonauts find a twelve-inch ingot before they so much as start digging. If we got that much, in ten minutes, we ought to land at least a million dollars' worth, in a day of real hunting. Barry!" he broke off, "all this thing is as queer as they make 'em. It gives me a kind of spooky feeling. But it's a feeling I like. And I'd rather play this merry little game than clean up all the rice-fortunes that ever happened. Wouldn't you?"

"No," said Barry, "I wouldn't. That isn't priggishness. It's the truth. I suppose in every normal man there's still left over a streak of the school boy. There is in me, I know. And in you that streak is wider than all the rest of you put together. Well, that same streak in me makes me revel in this wild goose chase of ours;—the way a kid revels in a detective story. But the rest of me,—the real me,—says I'm a fool to do this, and that you are, too; and that we'd be a lot

happier to stick to our own game and let gold and mysteries alone."

"But the mysteries won't let *us* alone!" protested O'Rell. "Take that phantom chap with the queer eyes, for example,—the one who peeked in on us last night and the night before! There's a mystery, all right. And we didn't go looking for it. It came to us. What do you suppose was the chap's idea, anyway, in the first place? That first night, we didn't have the ingot in the house. We didn't even know it existed. He must have had some kind of reason for spying on us. People don't do things without any reason at all."

"No?" mused Barry, more to himself than to Dick. "Don't they? Then how about this case, I—I heard of, once? A case of a man we'll call Smith. There was a man we'll call Jones, whom Smith had seen a couple of times, by chance, but whom he didn't know, to speak to, and who couldn't possibly have had any grudge against him. Yet, one day, Jones shot at him, twice,—shot to kill, at that,—and, later, the same day, at sight of Smith at a window, he tried to draw a pistol on him. And, next day, he put an iron burr under the saddle of Smith's flyaway horse, to get Smith thrown or rolled on. Now, if people must have logical reasons for doing mysterious or murderous things, what was Jones's object in trying to kill a man whose very name he hardly knew?"

"I'm not a ouija board," said O'Rell. "How should I know what his object was? But,—if it's a true story,—you may depend on it Jones had some reason for what he did, and a mighty powerful reason, at that.

People, outside of dime-novels and 'stunt-movies,' don't try to kill other people; unless the desire to have those people die is greater than their own fear of justice and of their own consciences. Now, probably, Jones was either insane——"

"He wasn't," denied Gale. "I'm doctor enough to know that. He——"

"Or there was perhaps some enormous fortune at stake," hazarded Dick, "or perhaps he loved the same girl Smith loved or——"

"Or he didn't like the shape of Smith's haircut," supplemented Barry. "Your explanations are brilliant, Dick. Positively brilliant. The only trouble with them is that they don't explain."

He closed the subject with some slight abruptness. One of O'Rell's random guesses had set his thoughts to working. He remembered what Maida had said about Naylor's being "always at her elbow," since her arrival at her father's place.

Then, at once, he dismissed the idea as absurd. For, when Naylor had fired twice at him, down in the gorge-mouth, the secretary could not possibly have known of his acquaintance with Maida. No, Dick's theory was ridiculous. And Gale strove to put the whole inexplicable affair out of his mind.

The cousins separated at the outer gate of the ranch. Barry was due for a morning at the rice paddies. And O'Rell was bound for the "ewe camp," a mile to southward, to oversee the docking of the lambs.

Gale went first into the house, there to leave his slicker and Dick's; and to release Roy, who was still

vastly indignant at his master's refusal, earlier in the morning, to take the collie along on the treasure trip to Gopher Hill.

As he entered the house and deposited the two useless slickers on their pegs and examined Roy's eyes and nostrils for traces of last night's baptism of cayenne pepper, Barry was pondering on his wisest course with regard to Naylor's letter of the evening before. He was to have ridden with Maida this morning. In view of her father's prohibition, he could not well go to the Drace house. As he stood, irresolute whether to telephone Maida, explaining to her the cause of his non-appearance or whether a note would have more chance of reaching her, in case Naylor or Drace should come to the telephone, his ears caught the sound of a light tap-tap-tap on the walk, leading to the house.

He recalled the sound, readily, from the preceding day; and went to meet the messenger whose agile cane heralded, as before, his approach. Barry opened the front door, just as the irreproachably-clad Sludge was feeling his way up the steps; his list slippers groping like sensitive hands at each stair.

"Good morning, sir," said the valet, touching his shining derby hat, as he heard Gale's first tread on the veranda flooring. "Mr. Drace tried to reach you by telephone, an hour ago; but he could not get any answer. So he sent me here with this note."

The correct valet spoke almost reproachfully; as though rebuking Barry for sleeping too soundly to hear a telephone bell; and thus entailing on the blind man so long a walk.

"Mr. O'Rell and I have both been out and—and busy,—since before sunup," explained Barry, as he reached wonderingly for the note Sludge had exhumed from an inner pocket and was proffering to him. "No one was left here, except our Chinaboy. Chang has a mortal horror of telephones. He'd rather throw over his job than answer one. He always stops his ears when our 'phone rings. I believe he thinks they are magic. Lots of Chinks do, you know. I'm sorry you had this long trudge, though."

As he took the envelope from the primly gloved fingers of the blind man, he put a half-dollar in the valet's hand. Sludge touched his hat again.

"Thank you, sir," he said; adding: "Mr. Drace told me there was no answer."

"Mr. Drace gave you this, himself?" asked Barry. "Or did Mr. Naylor?"

"Mr. Drace, sir," returned Sludge. "He gave it to me, himself; and he told me to take it to you at once and that there was no answer. Good morning, sir."

Once more touching his hat, the valet swung about and departed; feeling his way down the walk and out into the road, with the swift sureness which had awakened Gale's admiration on the man's former visit.

Without waiting for Sludge to go, Barry had already torn open the envelope. Within was a single sheet of paper; not typed, this time, but written in a slightly shaky and cramped hand.

"My dear Mr. Gale," Barry read. "Since instructing my secretary to send you the letter which you received from him last evening, it has occurred to me that you

might not consider as personal my plea that all outsiders refrain from calling at my home, here. Therefore, at the risk of seeming more than necessarily discourteous, I am herewith endorsing his letter.

"May I request that you accept this as a definite refusal to receive you at my home; and that you furthermore will regard this cessation of acquaintance as applying to my daughter as well as to myself? She concurs in this request. Very truly yours, JARED DRACE."

Long and dazedly, Barry Gale stood, staring down at this strange epistle. Not content with ordering him, by proxy, to keep away, the financier had apparently thought it needful to cinch matters by a personal letter; —a letter forbidding him to continue his acquaintance with Maida as well as with her father!

Alternately indignant and sore perplexed, Barry read the note over and over again. To see Maida no more! Everything in him rebelled fiercely at the mandate.

"She concurs in this request!"

It couldn't be! Why, what had he done to merit this brutal dismissal? Maida had seemed so unfeignedly glad to be with him again! Was her father lying? It didn't seem likely. Yet——

Twice, Barry strode toward the telephone. Once he sat down to write to Maida demanding a reason for her action. But still he was irresolute and raging, when Roy proceeded to create a diversion.

The collie had been lying in the open front doorway, in the sunlight; lazily blinking down the yellow road.

Now, all at once, he broke into a loud fanfare of barking.

Gale glanced carelessly through the doorway, to learn the reason for the outburst.

Then, his idle glance grew fixed and blank. And a gasping shiver of incredulous amazement surged through him.

CHAPTER NINE

BARRY'S first astonished thought, as he glanced out into the sunlit road, was that the strain of the past few days and perhaps the scratch of Naylor's rifle-ball on his head, had given him delusions.

For, a minute earlier, he had been pondering, heart-sick, over Jared Drace's declaration that Maida assented to the command that all intercourse between them be severed. His world had seemed in ashes.

And, now,—by all that was blessed and wonderful,—Maida was at his own gate!

Reining in her daintily pawing little black mount, the girl sat, graceful and exquisite, in the flood of morning sunlight; looking with keen expectant interest up at the ranch house. Roy's fanfare of barking had held no challenge. It had been a shout of welcome. And now, before the little black horse had fairly come to a halt before the gate, the collie had frisked down the path and was gamboling about the visitor.

Now this was not Roy's way with strangers. He was ultra-conservative about forming new acquaintanceships; as are many highbred dogs of his breed. And, even as he himself ran down the steps and along the path to greet the girl, Barry found scope to marvel at the dog's making an exception in Maida's favor.

Roy, having danced gaily around the horse, had come

to a halt at the girl's side. He reared himself on his hind-legs, placing his white forepaws lightly on the saddle-cloth and laying his silken head against Maida's knee. She stooped and patted the smooth gold-and-white head; laughing down into the upraised brown eyes, and crooning friendly words to him in a tone that set the dog's plumed tail to waving in wide sweeps of ecstasy.

Thus, once in fifty times, will the most aloof collie give his eager friendship to a stranger;—and, for some unknown reason, that stranger is almost invariably a woman.

Maida ceased patting the collie's head and held out her trimly-gauntleted little hand to Barry Gale, as he ran up.

"Of all the lazy farmers!" she scoffed. "Here I spent a solid half hour trying to get you on the telephone! And you were so sound asleep you didn't even hear. So I decided I'd either have to ride alone or else stop by here on my way to Red Bluff and take a chance that you might be awake at last. I hope I didn't rouse you too early?"

"I've been out since hours before you even so much as thought of waking up," he retorted, in like vein, his heart bounding with joyous reaction from his recent despondency. "I've been up and out, for hours. I just got in, about twenty minutes ago. Chang, our Chinaboy, won't answer 'phones. Not guilty!"

His words about Chang reminded him that he had made this same explanation, not half an hour earlier,

to Sludge. And into his memory, afresh, came Drace's note.

"She concurs in this request!"

She "concurred" with Drace in demanding that Barry see her no more? And yet, of her own glorious free will, here she was at his gate! The man's mind buzzed, in vain effort to understand. Meanwhile, she was saying:

"I told you I'd try to go riding with you this morning. Then I found I had to stop at Red Bluff and do some shopping, that couldn't wait. And I thought I'd go down there on horseback. I didn't know whether you'd be willing to change our ride into a shopping tour. I believe men hate shopping, don't they? So I called up, to ask if you'd mind riding there with me and— and perhaps playing about in your beloved Farm Bureau, there, or asking conundrums of the County Agent or something, while I shop. Do you mind?"

"Do I?" repeated the ecstatic Barry. "*Do I?* Watch me and see. . . . Ohé, Chang!" he shouted; adding, as the Chinaboy stuck his head out of a side window, like a yellow and pigtailed cuckoo from its clock-door, "Saddle up Señora, on the jump; and bring her around here!"

"Too lazy even to saddle your own horse!" reproved Maida, in mock horror. "Of all the indolent lives for a live man to lead! I wonder you don't make Chang ride her, too, and save you the trouble of——"

"I'm too lazy to do a single blessed thing that will take me away from you for two whole minutes, now you're here!" he said, with the boyish laugh she re-

membered so happily in the old Baltimore days and had not heard from his lips since their new meeting in California. "You aren't really here, you know. I'm not even certain you're this side of the Sierras. It's all a gorgeous dream. But while it lasts, I'm not going to lose any of it by chasing off and saddling Señora when I can be with you. I always knew I'd strike treasure out here, in California. But I never struck it till you came. And now, if that speech isn't worthy of any feeble-minded schoolboy of ten, I'll think up one that is."

He was deliriously happy, at this unexpected sight of her; in the very hour when he had dreaded morbidly that he might never again see her. And he talked as garrulously as Dick O'Rell himself. Maida, listening, and watching his transfigured face, flushed deeply. She looked down at her hand, Barry's eyes followed the direction of hers. To their mutual amazement, they saw that he had not released his first eager grasp of her slender fingers.

Reluctantly, Gale let go of the little hand he had been holding. He glanced up at her in apology. But, in so doing, he surprised a look in her dark eyes that struck him dumb and athrill. Instantly the girl lowered her fringed lashes over the momentarily telltale eyes.

"Maida!" breathed the man, tensely,—fervidly,—*"Maida!"*

And then, as fate (or common sense) would will it, appeared Chang.

Up the short driveway from the stable trotted the Chinaboy, leading by the bridle the temperamental

Señora. And Barry would have given his share of the ranch to have had Chang and the mare a thousand miles away, for another ten minutes.

"Isn't she a beauty?" exclaimed Maida, who, woman-like, seemed as glad of the interruption as Barry lamented it. "Some day you must let me ride her,—just once! Won't you, Barry?"

"Y-yes,—yes,—of course!" babbled Gale, coming out of his roseate dream with somewhat the sensation that must be an aviator's when he hits earth from a hundred-foot sheer drop.

He bent to examine the mare's girth, and to give himself time to regain self-control. Barry longed for a third foot, wherewith to kick himself. Here, in one crazy moment, he had been on the point of undoing the work of years;—of breaking his sane resolve;—of offering his all-but penniless self to this heiress of many millions. Yet, heart and longing struggled furiously at the bonds wherewith once more he was strapping them down. And Gale was sick, with the very intensity of the struggle that raged within him.

Presently, he had won the mastery. And he swung himself to the saddle. Roy gamboled merrily on ahead, looking back with sparkling eyes to note the direction his master might be about to take.

"No, old chap!" called Barry. "Not to-day! Not the way we're going. Back to the veranda, Roy! You can't go, this time!"

With head and plumed tail adroop, the collie turned sadly back and plodded lifelessly toward the house. He was crushed in spirit at the loss of this chance for a

run with his adored deity and with the delightful new human friend who knew how to croon at him in the queer sweet high tone that dogs love; and who knew just where under the ears a collie likes best to be scratched. Yet, not for an instant did it occur to him to disobey. Implicit obedience was one of the few things Barry had bothered to teach him. And as the lessons had begun in puppyhood, they had been learned without the help of blows or threats.

"Oh, can't he come along?" pleaded Maida, touched by the dog's utterly crestfallen air, and by his perfect obedience. "Can't he? He's so splendid! And I know he wouldn't do any harm."

"Of course he wouldn't do any harm," assented Barry. "I'm not worrying about that. But plenty of harm might be done to him. At one ranch, down below here, the slogan is: 'Shoot every dog that crosses our line!' And, down at Red Bluff, in the past year or two, dozens of good dogs have been poisoned. One of them, only last week. A dog that his little crippled master used to hitch to a cart and drive around with. I don't want to risk any hurt coming to Roy. He means too much to me."

"How brutal!" she cried. "How horrible! Oh, the poor, gentle, brave, harmless dogs! To shoot them and poison them! It's——"

"It isn't usually done out of malice," explained Barry. "At least, not in Northern California. You see, a very few stray dogs worry sheep. So there are lots of people who think all dogs ought to suffer for those few. They claim that if there weren't any dogs,

there'd be millions of sheep in every State in the Union. They don't stop to think that, if all the dogs were wiped out, it would be only a handful of years before the United States would be overrun with wolves and bears and foxes and rats and wildcats and mountain lions,—and a dozen other kinds of murderous vermin that the dogs scare away or kill. The sheep would suffer a thousand times worse from that avalanche of pests than from such few dogs as worry them. Not one dog in a thousand is a sheepkiller, you know. And no big flock of sheep can be managed without a dog. Even Ellenwood admitted that to me, the other day; much as he hates dogs. He says sheep have mighty little sense; but that they have sense enough to know when a shepherd's authority isn't backed by a dog. And in a day or two they get out of hand and become unmanageable. But while there are guns and poison waiting for dogs, hereabouts, I'll leave Roy at home, except when I'm riding in the other direction."

"I haven't met any of the California people, since I've been here," she said, as they set forth, southward, their horses moving neck and neck, with mincingly fidgeting steps. "And I want to, so much! Are they very different from Easterners? I've read Bret Harte, of course. But——"

"You might as well read Chaucer," he replied, "to give you an idea how modern Englishmen talk and behave. In a way, these Californians up here are a lot different from us. In a way, they aren't. And where they are, I'm sorry to say the difference is all in their favor. Take New England, or the South, or

the Middle West, or any other region than this. Each section has its own peculiar dialect or intonations or idioms. Each section except this. But you can't tell the speech of a wellbred North Californian from the speech of a wellbred New Yorker. They have no accent or intonation that is different from New York's; except that their English is apt to be a bit purer. And they dress like New Yorkers, too.

"On the other hand, there is a spaciousness of view, a warmth of heart, an individuality, and above all a gorgeous sweep of hospitality, here, that you'll find nowhere else on earth. Sometimes I think that the sky-high mountain wall that cuts off California from the rest of America has something to do with it. It isolates the Californians, to some extent. And it lets them keep their own fine characteristics, untarnished. Mind you, I'm speaking of California, from Del Monte, north. The southern half of the State wasn't settled to any extent by born Californians; but by Middle Westerners. And the two halves are as different from each other as Kansas is different from Virginia. San Francisco, for instance, is a wonder-city. It's vibrant with an atmosphere all its own. It is more like a blend of New York and Washington and Paris than like anything else. But Los Angeles is——

"Here I'm harping again on my favorite hobby!" he caught himself up, feeling that his monologue had by now served its calculated purpose of shifting their inter-course miles away from such perilous personalities as had just threatened to wreck it, "and boring you to death. You'll see a little of what I mean, though, when

you go to Red Bluff. Red Bluff is the region's farming center. It has only about four thousand inhabitants. But there is no town of its size that I know of, in the East, that can compare with it for civic improvements and shops and schools and public buildings and the best kind of up-to-date progress. And now, the sermon is over. What do you say to a gallop? This is a good bit of soft road, for the next quarter-mile."

The two horses, at first intimation from their riders, dashed off at racing speed, still neck-and-neck; and the fresh morning wind whipped the faces of man and maid, to a tingling glow. Not until the racers were brought down with difficulty to a staid trot, as they reached the gray concrete highway, did Barry summon courage to bring up a subject that could not indefinitely be ignored. Hating to mar the delight of his morning with Maida, yet realizing that he and she were together under false pretenses, he said, reluctantly:

"Last evening I had a note from Naylor. He said he wrote in your father's name and at his request. He asked me not to call at Mr. Drace's house again, and——"

"No!" exclaimed Maida, unbelievably. "No! Surely, you're joking, Barry? You're not in earnest?"

The glow of color fled from her face at his words. The gay mask she had been wearing, for his benefit, fell away. And now he saw for the first time how wan and troubled she was.

"Why!" he said, impulsively, shocked by the swift change in her. "What's wrong? There's nothing so very tragic in it;—now that I know it wasn't any doing

of yours. He can't stop my seeing you, somewhere or other, if you'll let me. We're both of age, and——"

"Please, Barry!" she begged, her voice trembling ever so little. "Please believe my father had nothing to do with such a note as you say Wolfe Naylor wrote you. I—I don't want to explain. But he hadn't. Mr. Naylor must have done it on his own responsibility. Father would be furious if he knew such a thing had been written to any friend of mine. Promise me you'll keep right on coming to see me, just as if you hadn't gotten that absurd letter. My father——"

"I hate like toadpie to go on with this rotten line of talk," said Barry, miserably. "But I've got to. If I didn't, you wouldn't understand my not calling on you any more. You'd think——"

"Not calling on me any more?" she repeated, hurt and surprised at his answer. "Why, Barry, surely you won't be so foolish as to pay any attention to what Mr. Naylor said;—after what I've just told you;—and after my saying Father never could have known of the abominable letter!"

"Of course, I wouldn't pay an atom of attention to Naylor's note," replied Gale, floundering, "after you've told me it wasn't authorized. Only,—only——"

"Only what?" she insisted.

"Only," went on Barry, reaching into his coat pocket and drawing forth the crumpled sheet of note paper he had thrust there instinctively on sight of Maida at the ranch house gate, "only this seems to make it unanimous, so far as Mr. Drace and Naylor are concerned. I wish I didn't have to show it to you, Maida. Hon-

estly, I'd rather be kicked than show it to you. But if I didn't, you'd never understand why I have to keep away from your father's house;—even while you're still living there."

He handed her the paper. Maida glanced at it in puzzled interest. Then, as she read on, her flower face lost still more of its faint coloring; and into her eyes came a stricken look that cut the closely watching man to the very soul.

Twice, unbelieving and aghast, she read the brief letter through. Then she lifted her unhappy eyes and met Gale's.

"Barry," she said, dazedly. "This is in Father's hand. He wrote it. But,—but I—I don't believe it. He—he *couldn't!*"

"Don't distress yourself over it, like that!" cried Barry, in sharp protest, as he saw her big eyes mist over with unshed tears. "Don't! I'm not worth it! You're not to make yourself wretched, like this! If—if you care enough about—about letting me see you sometimes,—why, I'll do it if I have to smash my way through Naylor and every guard on the place!"

Which was of course a braggingly foolish thing to say; but perhaps was a gallant and loverly thing, as well. And the man was too much in dead earnest to choose or restrain his words. To neither Maida nor himself did the wild boast seem ridiculous. Indeed, the girl smiled at him through the tear-mist; as in pride at his daring and devotion.

Again, at her smile, Barry felt that former unconquerable surge of emotion,—of stark need to tell this

wonder-sweetheart of his that he loved her. And, to silence it, he asked, muting his eager voice:

"Can you guess at all why Mr. Drace wrote this? Why he assumed that you, as well as himself, didn't want to see me again? Have I done anything to make him dislike me or to let him think I'm not fit to call on his daughter? Can't you clear it up, at all, Maida? Can't you? Try to think!"

But she did not try to think. In a flash she knew. Into her mental vision snapped the picture she had seen from the stairs; the transom-framed picture of Jared Drace slumping low in his study chair; shuddering, and with face buried in his shaking hands; while Naylor sat laughing down at him in careless victory.

She remembered Drace's abject terror of the secretary, as betokened in his later talk with herself;—Naylor's mad infatuation for her and his declaration that she should one day marry him. And she understood, all at once, why Naylor should want Barry Gale or any other possible rival barred from the house;—how he could have put on the pressure until he coerced the broken Drace to write this note she held.

She recalled, too, for the first time, the strange look of wondering wrath Naylor had turned upon her when she had lifted in her arms the unconscious Gale's head as Barry rolled helplessly to the foot of the ridge, from the touch of Naylor's bullet. The love-mad secretary had guessed,—*must* have guessed,—from her actions and words in that first unguarded moment of shock at seeing Gale shot down,—enough to make him

ragingly eager to clear such a man out of the path of his own wooing.

That Drace should have yielded to his secretary's wish,—and should have written this contemptible note, involving herself in his dismissal of Barry,—showed Maida more clearly than had anything else how completely and hopelessly her father was under Naylor's mysterious domination. It was conceivable that Drace, for unknown business reasons, might have consented to let the secretary stay on in his employ, after the man's brutal love-making toward Maida. But she found it hard to understand how Drace could have been bullied or scared into forbidding any one the house at Naylor's command. Least of all, a man whom, she told her father, was an old and dear friend of her own. And, she felt strangely alone in the world,—alone and frightened and defenseless.

In this pitiful new mood she turned to Barry Gale, eagerly, childishly, for help and support. He was so strong, so fearless, so self-reliant! Maida's heart went out to him in a great wave of yearning. Into her eyes, again, sprang unbidden the look he had once before surprised there. And it went through the lover like the breath of God.

Out went his hand, instinctively, to clasp hers. But before he could speak, the girl herself was speaking,—swiftly, impulsively, half-tearfully.

"Oh, Barry!" she cried. "I'm so unhappy,—so confused! There's no one of my own for me to go to for help or for sympathy. I—I have no right to tell you what I'm going to tell you;—no right in the world, I

suppose. But honestly, I don't mean it as disloyalty to Father. And besides, he and I both owe it to you, as an explanation for his writing so, to you. Listen!"

With which disjointed preamble, she plunged feverishly into her story; beginning with Naylor's cave-man proposal. This she slurred over, embarrassedly; and speaking very fast and with averted eyes. Many details she omitted.

But at the recital, Barry Gale went white to the very lips with scarce-contained fury. He craved, almost irresistibly, to wheel his horse and to gallop back to the Drace house at breakneck speed, there to hunt out the secretary and strangle him with naked hands or smash to powder every bone in the tall body. Gale was frightened at his own maniac wrath toward the man whose brute touch and brute words had so contaminated this glorious little sweetheart of his.

He dared not interrupt, by so much as a word, her shamed recital; lest he break forth in lurid language of fury which might shock her by its blasphemous savagery almost as much as had Naylor's own violence. Yet he swore a mighty oath within himself that the secretary should pay—and pay with compound and usurious interest,—for his affront to her.

Then, hurrying on to a less degrading theme, Maida told of Jared Drace's spirited interference in her behalf; and of his angry dismissal of the secretary; then of what she had seen, through the transom, on her way downstairs; and of Drace's later cowed interview with her in her own room.

"Oh," she finished with a half-sob of desperation,

"I can't make anything out of it, at all! It's no more the way my father,—the dear old dad I'd always known and loved,—it's no more the way I'd have expected him to behave than,—than night is like this morning! He is so horribly changed! And I can't see why. I had dinner last evening and breakfast to-day in my rooms. I couldn't sit at the same table with Mr. Naylor. I couldn't! But after breakfast I went to Father's study, when he was alone there for a minute; and I asked if I could do anything for him. He just shook his head and went on studying some reports on his desk. So I came away. I——"

"I can't make head or tail of it at all," said Barry, speaking for the first time. "I've followed your father's career fairly closely, through the newspapers and through friends of his that I've known. And all this queer secrecy and fear are as unlike him as they'd be unlike Carnegie, himself. Why, in the first place, should such a man have shut himself up in that god-forsaken place and turned his back on all his old world? Why should he—whose business and personal life have been so aboveboard,—why should he have to cringe before a swine like Naylor? Why should he surround himself with armed guards, in a peaceful region like this? What was the mysterious work his imported laborers were busy at, so long, down in the gorge off Iron Canyon;—work that called for steel doors and all that kind of thing, and that was so closely guarded as to warrant Naylor in opening fire on a harmless stranger like myself? What has aged and changed

your father so? What is Naylor's hold over him? If——"

"Sometimes," she hazarded, timidly, "sometimes I wonder if hard work and so many big enterprises have——have touched Father's brain. He's so——"

"No," denied Barry. "I'm still doctor enough to know a sane man from a lunatic. Your father is as sane as you are. Though, how long he'll stay so, under this mysterious strain on him, I don't know. But that's no business of mine," he caught himself up. "The only thing that concerns me is the effect of all this on *you*. And——"

"But what shall I do, Barry?" she asked, helplessly. "What is there for me to do? I want so to be of use to him, in this trial, whatever it may be. But how can I? If——"

"It is not the place for you to be in!" he declared, incisively. "There's mystery and danger all around that house. And you must get away from it. You must go back to the East!"

He spoke with strong decision; yet the counsel he gave was bitter to him; and it called for all the unselfishness in his makeup to insist on her going once more out of his life. Nerving himself to his task, he continued:

"You are not safe in the same house with a beast like Naylor. You have no protection from your own father. You must go back to New York."

"Barry, I can't!" she protested. "If there is danger or trouble, I can't leave Father out here, thousands of miles away from his friends and his home, to bear it

all alone. I must stick by him. But, oh, I wish he'd let me be of some real help!"

"I tell you," he persisted, "I'm not going to let you stay there, unprotected and miserably unhappy. Even if I have to break Naylor's neck, to rid you of danger from him!"

Somehow, she did not seem to resent his air of masterful authority. Instead, for some occult reason, she appeared to find it oddly comforting.

"I'll do whatever you think best, Barry," she said in a submission he found adorable, "except—except to leave Father, while he is in such trouble. I can't do that. If I deserted him now, I could never forgive myself. Don't you see, I——?"

"I see the only thing in life that matters to me is your welfare and your happiness," he answered. "That's why I want you to go away."

"Was that why *you* went away from me, nearly five years ago?" she asked, with sudden intuition.

And, meeting the compelling question in her eyes as she bent toward him, Barry Gale's self-control and his years of sacrificing resolve crumbled very suddenly to fragments.

"No," he said,—more like a sullen schoolboy than an ardent suitor. "I went away from you, then, because I loved you,—because I knew I could never love any other woman or forget you; so long as I should live."

There was a tense interval of silence, while Barry cursed his rebellious tongue for speaking what he had vowed to conceal forever. He forbore to look at her.

And he braced himself for whatever chilling form her reply might take.

The horses jogged along, side by side; under the azure glory of the California sky. The brick church's spire and the Tremont Hotel's white façade, at Red Bluff, a mile below, came into brief view around the turn. And still the two rode on, speechless. Then, Maida Drace spoke; her sweet voice scarce more than a whisper.

"You—you cared for me?" she breathed. "Wasn't—wasn't that a rather strange reason for running away from me,—Barry?"

"No!" he rasped, self-contempt stirring him out of his nervous suspense. "No. It was the best reason imaginable. Think it over, for a minute, and you'll see it was."

"I've—I've been 'thinking it over,' " she returned, in that same half-whisper. "I've been 'thinking it over,' for the best part,—or the worst part,—of five years, Barry. And I can't yet see why you went away. When people—when people care, they don't go away. Unless—unless they find out that there is no use in caring. And you never found that out, Barry. You know you didn't. Why did you stop coming to see me? Please tell me! It made me so unhappy. It has always made me so unhappy. Tell me!"

He would not heed the message that her words and her intonation and her eyes were singing to his heart. Savagely angry at himself for having wrecked his own fine resolutions, he spoke with an unwonted harshness.

"I loved you. I wanted you to be my wife. I was poor,—dead broke,—a struggling young dub of a half-starved doctor. I never stopped to think whether you were as poor as I was or not. In my fatuous idiocy it seemed to me that it would be a divine thing for us to marry on nothing a year,—that it would give me an incentive to forge ahead and win money and fame for your sake. . . . That's the kind of a young fool I was!"

He set his teeth and blundered on with his acrid confession, still not daring to look at her.

"Then,—the night of your birthday dance," he said, "Nell Carrington told me you were Jared Drace's daughter. She had supposed I knew it. As if I would have kept on coming to see you and let myself get deep and deeper in love with you, if I'd known! She said you were Jared Drace's daughter. In other words, that I'd been planning to lay my penny-a-year future and my presumptuous self at the feet of a girl who could have bought and sold the whole street I lived in! I wasn't in the fortune-hunting business," he finished, bitterly. "So I cleared out. That's all. And I suppose it's plenty. . . . I'm—I'm sorry I've spoiled your ride, this way."

There was another silence, broken only by the rhythmic dual thud-thud-thud of the horses' feet on the flinty road. Barry did not yet dare look at the girl. He felt oddly dull and apathetic. His close-guarded secret of years was out. And after his blurted confession, of course, there could be no further hope of continuing his wonderful association with Maida.

Mildly, he wondered how she would take what he had just said;—not that it could matter much, either way, now. Again, it was she who broke the silence.

“But,” she urged, in what seemed to her tormented hearer to be a cruelly needless harping on a painful theme, “but, Barry, if you made up your mind to put me out of your life,—without even bothering to ask if I wanted you to,—and if you kept away from me so long, then why have you gone on seeing me and asking me to ride with you, and all that; since we met out here? Why have you?”

“Because I’m only a poor slob of a mortal!” he retorted. “And because I’m not even one per cent hero. Because the sight of you, again, made me feel I’d rather risk heartbreak than put you out of my life a second time. Oh, I’ve gone on with my eyes open! I’ve realized the situation is unchanged since the Baltimore days,—except that I’m making a good living, now, for a poor man. About enough, I suppose, to keep such a girl as you in gloves and shoes. I’ve gone on, knowing we could never be anything to each other and that every time I saw you I was laying up a double portion of misery for the future. I’ve gone on, because I’m dunce enough to be willing to buy a day’s admission to Fool’s Paradise at the cost of no end of years’ sorrow, afterward. And now, for heaven’s sake, let’s talk about something else!”

But, perversely she would not follow his lead and let the unhappy subject drop.

“Barry,” she said, presently, “you have just been calling yourself a lot of bad names. And you didn’t

deserve one of them. But,—like a man,—you omitted to call yourself the one thing you really deserved to be called."

"If I've overlooked any self-insult," he said in sorry mirth, "by all means let me know what it is."

"You forgot to accuse yourself of being the most profoundly selfish man I ever knew," she accused.

"Selfish?" he echoed, bewildered. "In most things, probably I am. But certainly I wasn't in this. If ever a man did one unselfish thing in his life——"

"In most things," she corrected him, "you are splendidly unselfish. But, in this, you were cruelly selfish, Barry. For you thought only of yourself and your own silly pride and your distorted ideals of what an honorable man should do. You never for an instant seem to have thought how your decision might have affected me,—or how my own heart might have been bruised by your going away like that, without even a word to me. Or——"

"Maida!" he cried aloud in blank wonder.

The girl sighed, in mock despair.

"Barry Gale!" she rebuked him, as he rode, with averted face, close beside her. "Barry! Are you going to be despicable enough to make me propose to you?"

Romeyn, the rancher, who had called on Gale and O'Rell the evening before, to inquire about the Sale barley, was on his way to Red Bluff, to consult the County Agent further about this proposed crop for his ten-acre corner.

Chugging along, townward, in his rusty little run-about, he rounded a bend in the road, and saw, a bare

hundred yards ahead of him, a man and a girl. They had their backs to him and were going in the same direction as himself. Yet he recognized the man as Barry Gale. And he raised his tufted sorrel brows at sight of the young rancher wasting such a fine work-morning in company with any woman. For Barry had not only the reputation of being a tireless and eternal worker, but of having cast a blind eye on all the decidedly pretty girls of the neighborhood.

Yet, here Gale was, in mid-morning, loafing along a country road, as though he had the whole day before him. Moreover, he was riding unnecessarily close beside this trimly-habited young woman; and seemed to be wholly absorbed in her society.

Again Romeyn's rufous brows hitched themselves in wonder. And he prepared to put on a burst of speed and to call out something jocular to the indolent youth, in passing the two;—something about only rich men being able to afford to squander a busy mid-week morning in sparking. But, all at once, he changed his purpose with excessive suddenness; and wellnigh ditched his roadster while he stared goggle-eyed at the pair ahead of him.

For, even as he watched them thus amusedly, he heard Barry cry out with a wild happiness,—a cry whose sound sent crinkly little thrills through the much-married old fellow's calloused heart. And he saw Gale sway toward the girl at his side and catch her bodily in his strong arms.

He saw the girl's arms slip upward and around Barry's neck, as their lips met. He saw them, thus,

heart to heart and mouth to mouth, close interlocked, for a long quarter-minute; while, by some miracle of Cupid's, the two restive horses continued to plod evenly along, side by side, and to leave the lovers free to revel, to the full, in this, the first long kiss that sealed their betrothal.

"If one of them hosses had of took it into his head to shy or stumble or bolt," dizzily mused old Romeyn, as the two riders at length released each other and looked guiltily about in quest of possible witnesses, "there'd 'a been the grandest spill since the time the Cross-Country Express forgot to stop, when it got to Oakland Ferry. Gee, but it must be grand to be young!"

"Oh!" ejaculated Maida, horrified, as a backward glance revealed to her the approaching oldster in his ancient-vintage car. "He must have seen! He *must*! What will he think?"

"He won't 'think,' at all!" returned Barry, not even troubling to look back. "He'll *know*. He'll know I'm the luckiest and craziest happy man under the sun! He'll——"

The rattle of the car cut in on his boyish exultation. Romeyn swung past them, and grinned up, cheerily, into the two embarrassed faces.

"Morning, Gale!" he sang out, slowing down his roadster for a moment or two. "When I caught sight of you, first, back around the bend, I figgered you was wasting a whole passel of time, this bright day. But almost right off I saw you wasn't wasting any time at all;—not a split second of time was you wasting! You was sure making hay while the sun shone! So

long,—and a bar'l of good luck to the two of you!"

In a scurry of yellow dust he was off, down the gray road toward town. Maida gasped, in dire confusion. But Barry Gale laughed aloud. He bent down and kissed the scarlet face upraised so worriedly to his.

"In case he should happen to look back," explained Barry.

And his infectious and gloriously happy laugh awoke Maida's own sweet laughter in response. For an instant, the two laughs, musical and divinely glad, rang out over the valley, like a gay challenge to fate.

Then, of a sudden, Barry sobered. And his face lost its unwonted youthfulness.

"Dear girl!" he said. "This is an insane thing we've done! The situation is just where it was before. I'm a poor rancher and you're——"

"Barry!" she complained, "with much woe in her voice. "Are you going to be melodramatic and talk about poverty in rags and moneybags and all that? Not that I ever saw a moneybag, outside a cartoon; and, there, you can always tell them from prize pumpkins because they have a big dollar-mark on their sides. You've wasted five heavenly years by feeling that way. And you've made me waste them, too. And it's all a silly scruple, at best. We love each other. You're making a good living. There's nothing against either of our characters; and we're both of age. Those are all the requisites any couple need. Even from a common sense worldly viewpoint. Nothing else matters.

Keep on remembering that. We're—we're engaged, and—— We *are* engaged, aren't we, Barry?"

"But——" he began, in one last lingering struggle of his good resolves.

"Barry!" she chided, plaintively, "wasn't it humiliating enough for me to have to propose to you, without your piling up senseless objections and——"

"You *didn't* propose to me!" he denied, vehemently. "I——"

"Didn't I? Well, I shall, unless you stop trying to cloud the wonderfulest happy hour in all history by a mass of glumly senseless scruples. If you care more for your pride than you care for me——"

"There comes another car," interrupted Gale, surrendering once and forever, and insanely rapturous in this smashing of his ancient gods of self-respect and pride, "and perhaps it might be nice to announce our engagement to its occupants as we did to Romeyn, just now. I——"

"Barry *Gale!*" she expostulated, in horror, drawing far away from him, lest, a second time, he bring her to public confusion. "If you dare, if you *dare*——!"

"I've heard that women love daring in a man," he teased, edging Señora nearer to her.

In laughing terror, the girl drew her mount far to one side of the road, threatening Gale with her crop and glaring at him with all the malignant fury of a three-month Persian kitten. The two were gorgeously happy. And their happiness made them light-headed;—or what the Scots call "fey."

The world was a marvellous place to do one's living

in. A miracle had brought them together, from across the entire Continent; and had this day made them one. Small marvel that they were more like two children newly released from a grim school than like sedate grown-ups!

The car, of which Barry had just spoken, was coming from the direction of Red Bluff. It was traveling fast, toward them. And, now, fifty yards away, its driver clapped on the brakes. Gale and the girl glanced toward the automobile to see the cause of this sudden slowing down.

The car's driver and sole occupant was Wolfe Naylor. Returning from a business call at the Red Bluff bank, he saw ahead of him the two riders. Even as he recognized them, through the light haze of dust that hung over the road, he saw Barry reach toward Maida, one arm outstretched.

He saw the girl recoil, drawing her horse far to one side and menacing Barry with her upraised crop. The welt of such a crop was still hot and painful athwart Naylor's own sallow cheek. And at the sight of Gale's seeming repulse, his heart beat quick.

Slowing his car, as he approached them, he took one hand from the steering wheel and slipped his groping fingers into his hip pocket. Then drawing to a halt, abreast of the two amazed lovers, he jumped to the ground and confronted them.

"If this man is annoying you, Miss Drace," he said, truculently, "I——"

Despite his hatred and utter disgust for the man, Barry could not for the life of him refrain from a

shout of laughter. And, spurred on by the imp of perverse mischief which sometimes mastered him, he answered on hasty impulse:

"I'm afraid there's no chance for you to play the Knight Errant. You see, Miss Drace has just done me the unbelievable honor to say she will marry me. And——"

With a snarl, as of physical pain, Naylor flashed his glance from Gale to Maida. Catching the expression in her eyes, he went livid. With a lightning swift gesture he whipped out the thing he had reached into his hip pocket for.

CHAPTER TEN

M AIDA, warned by the glint in Wolfe Naylor's little eyes, acted wholly on instinct. Even before the pistol itself glittered in the secretary's hand, before he could level it at Barry,—she had drawn taut her horse's bridle and had dug the spur deep into the mount's shining black side.

As she applied the spur, she reined sharply to the right. The restive black, indignant at such gross maltreatment, obeyed with a whirl of his nervous body the dual urge of spur and of bit.

Veering swiftly to the right in answer to the jerking rein, he swung his flank with full, if unconscious, force against Naylor's body.

The secretary's back was to the horse; and his whole mind was concentrated in his mad impulse toward the man who had just boasted of winning the girl he himself so fiercely craved. Goaded to sudden insane action by Barry's words, he had whipped out the pistol by instinct rather than by conscious act. He himself did not know whether he meant to shoot,—and to risk the death penalty by killing this enemy in the presence of a dangerous witness,—or if the motion were of mere threat.

The pistol was out, before Naylor realized what he was doing. And, as he leveled it,—before the thunder-struck Barry could make the first move to defend him—

self,—a whirling object of great size and weight smote the secretary on the left shoulder, knocking him clean off his feet.

Hurled suddenly from his balance, he tumbled into the road, on all fours. The pistol, released by the involuntary outward fling of his fingers as he fell, rolled into the wayside ditch.

Even before he sought to rise, Naylor threw himself forward along the ground, and grabbed for the weapon. But he was a fraction of a second too slow.

Barry Gale's wits, momentarily dazed by the unforeseen onslaught, were awake again. Pushing Señora forward across the road, and swooping down from the saddle as he went, Gale snatched up the fallen pistol.

He grasped it just as Wolfe Naylor's fingers were closing around its butt. Straightening himself again in the saddle, he watched Naylor clamber to his feet, coated with dust. But, as he glanced down at the secretary, his eye was caught by the pistol he had salvaged from the ditch. And his brows bent, in bewilderment, as he looked at it.

On the black rubber butt were two small silver letters: "W. N."

Now, it was by no means odd that Naylor's pistol should bear his initials. But, Barry recalled perfectly that these same initials had been on the butt of the pistol he had wrenched out of the secretary's fist, two nights earlier, in Drace's study. That pistol he had flung far away, into a bunch of bushes, a hundred feet from the road; on his way home. The night had been

pitch dark. No one could have seen him throw the weapon away, nor, in that darkness, could have seen where it landed. Nor could there be one chance of a million that Naylor, passing along the fields, next day, should have found it by accident. Yet here it was,—or else another just like it and initialed in the same way.

"The fellow must keep a whole collection of monogrammed automatics," thought Barry. "I don't wonder. He needs to;—by the rate he loses them!"

Naylor had regained his footing. He stood glaring up alternately at the startled and pallid girl, who was trying to quiet her plunging horse, and at the rancher who returned his glower with such level glance. Toying with the pistol, Barry lowered his voice in an effort to make his words intelligible to Naylor alone; and not to Maida, whose horse was some yards away, still passaging and curvetting, under memory of the spur. Said Gale:

"It's none of my business, Mr. Naylor, of course. But until you can calm your merry tendencies toward homicide, you would do better to keep entirely away from firearms. The first time I met you, down by the gorge, you shot twice at me. The second time you saw me, at the window in Mr. Drace's house, you reached for your pistol. The third time,—in Mr. Drace's library,—you drew a gun on me again, and I had to take it away from you. I pass over the time you tried to make my horse kill me and when you threatened me with an ax. But now, on no provocation at all, you draw a pistol on me again. It's getting to be a habit. And if you keep it up, your chances for the electric

chair will grow brighter and brighter as the months go on. I'm going to try to postpone the day of your execution, by keeping this pistol. You'd only pull it on me again, if I gave it back to you. And I'd have all the bother of getting it away from you once more. So I'll keep it."

He spoke lightly, striving to curb his rising temper; lest he forget Maida's near presence and force Naylor to fight him, foot to foot, bare handed; as he yearned to make him do. He spoke on; seeking to drown in words his craving to thrash his enemy to a pulp, in payment for the unprovoked assaults on him.

"Tell me," he demanded, as Naylor made no reply but stood scowling up at him and at the half-leveled pistol, "what is your grudge against me? Are you man enough to name it, here and now? Or do you prefer to keep on taking pot-shots at me from a distance? Speak up."

The secretary did not answer. But one corner of his upper lip writhed silently upward, revealing a yellowish wolf-eyetooth.

"According to Mr. Drace," pursued Barry, seizing the moments while Maida's horse still curvetted at the far side of the road, "it seems you wouldn't hurt a fly. But I'd hate to trust you, in fly-season. Now, there is one thing more; and then we'll ride on and leave you. You have insulted Miss Drace. That is not on the free list. And if I live to meet you in any place where she will not be distressed by seeing a cur thrashed half to death, you'll pay an instalment or two on that debt. I have the honor to be engaged to marry

Miss Drace. That gives me the right to see she is not molested. And if I hear of your speaking to her again, or so much as looking at her, I shall not only give you the thrashing I've promised you, but I shall make formal complaint to the County authorities at Red Bluff that you tried to kill me; and I shall have you jailed and brought to trial on a charge of attempted murder. Understand that. It is a warning. Not a threat. Come, Maida," raising his voice, as she reined her scare-quieted mount alongside. "Shall we ride on?"

A little to his surprise, Barry noted that the jail-threat had an oddly disquieting effect on Naylor. The man blanched, and seemed actually to cower under it. And Barry wondered.

They left the secretary standing, white and snarling, in mid-road; and cantered on.

"I couldn't hear very much," said Maida, as she and Gale trotted toward the town. "This horse of mine resented the treatment I had to give him. All the while I tried to listen to you, he kept plunging and whirling around. And you spoke so low. So I missed most of it. But——"

"I wanted you to miss *all* of it," said he. "And I want to tell you, too, what a splendid thing you did, by swinging your horse against Naylor, when he flashed that gun. It was a corking bit of presence of mind. But I'd give a year's income to have saved you the shock of seeing——"

"You were saying something to him about having tried to kill you, before," she insisted. "What was

it? Did you mean the time, there, at the gorge? Or was there some other time?"

Reluctantly, under her crossfire of troubledly imperative questions, Gale told, bit by bit, of his various clashes with the secretary. And though he had not meant to tell, he realized, as he answered her insistent queries, that soon or late, she must have been told. He cut short her indignant exclamations of his recital, and sought to shift the talk into calmer channels, by saying:

"In another minute we'll be at the foot of the slope, where Main Street starts. Look there, to the left, where the Sacramento has cut deep into the reddish bank at that turn of the river. They say the town gets its name from that line of salmon-colored water-side bluffs. And——"

"The moment I get home," she interrupted, refusing to be turned aside from her theme, "I shall tell Father not only what you've told me about Wolfe Naylor, but that I myself saw him aim a pistol at you, to-day. And Father will see he is sent away at once,—this very day. I know he will. It's one thing to keep a useful man who makes horrid love to one's daughter. But it's quite another to let a would-be murderer stay on in the house. And he'll——"

"If you are wise," urged Barry, "you'll say nothing at all about it. If Mr. Drace would let Naylor stay on, after he insulted you so, the chances are that he'd let him stay, if every crime in the statute books were proved against him. But, when you go home, I'm going with you. I am going to beard the lion in his

study-den. In other words, I'm going to tell your father I've had the asinine presumption to ask his daughter to marry me. In that way, I'll give him a fair chance to kick me out of his house. And I won't blame him for trying to do it, either. He——"

"No!" she forbade. "You mustn't. You'll ride with me as far as the gates and you'll leave me there. If you go to Father in that high tragedy spirit, there's certain to be a row. I want to tell him, myself. I can always manage Father. At least, I always used to be able to. He's never refused me anything I wanted. And, oh, Barry!" she finished, in a little rush of words, "I do want *you* so very, very much!"

And, at the last, he gave in to her wish in the matter. Two hours later they drew rein at the gates of the Drace estate. Gale leaned toward her, as they parted; and kissed her; their hands close clasped.

The next instant, both horses trembled violently and snorted as in panic fear. As they did so, the riders were aware of a jarring, seasick motion of the ground beneath them. A faint rumble sounded from far off, softer yet more ominous than thunder. And again the very world seemed to heave slightly under their horses' feet.

Maida reined in her scared mount and looked at Barry in questioning wonder. The man's face was suddenly grave.

"Earthquake!" he said, tersely. "Just a mild shock, of course,—all the few earthquake shocks, hereabouts, are mild,—but an earthquake shock, for all that. Don't be frightened. It isn't dangerous. Though for

some reason it always has a queer effect on horses and on most other animals. Don't let it make you uncomfortable."

"An earthquake!" she exclaimed, more in childlike curiosity than in any alarm. "I never felt one, before. Do they happen very often, here?"

"No," he reassured her, "mighty seldom. Oftener in the South. There probably won't be another in the next five years. And they're always slight."

"But if they could have an earthquake violent enough to demolish San Francisco," she asked, "why not the same kind of earthquake here?"

"Only that there hasn't happened to be any severe one, in this region, for ever so long," said Gale, "and there's never likely to be. And, by the way, if ever you're talking to San Franciscans, for goodness' sake don't speak of the 'earthquake.' Call it the 'fire.' They don't like to hear that Nineteen-Six calamity called an earthquake. Just as they don't like to hear their own city called 'Frisco.' You're sure you won't change your mind and let me ride in with you? Good bye, then, sweetheart."

He stooped and kissed her once more; then sat his horse and watched her canter down the winding drive until she disappeared around a turn. Slowly, he turned Señora's head toward his own ranch.

As he rode, he chanced to glance eastward. Lassen's ten thousand feet of snowy bulk was no longer etched vividly against the brilliant azure of the California sky. The mountaintop was lost in murk. Above it belched and hung sullen dun clouds. Wavering fin-

gers of brown-black smoke were creeping upward from the invisible crater and across the eastern heavens.

Barry looked long and frowningly at the volcano. As he still watched it, Señora snorted in terror, and tried to bolt. And, at the same instant the road below him trembled again. Far below, in his grazing grounds, he could hear the wild stampede of his sheep; and the sharp barks of Zit, as the little black dog hurled himself among them and rounded them up.

"That was heavier than the first shock!" muttered Gale. "Heavy enough to crack a window or two, I should think. Maybe enough to send somebody's badly-built chimney toppling."

By the time he reached the grazing grounds, Zit had brought his silly charges to a semblance of order; and Señora herself was beginning to quiet down.

"*La terre qui tremble!*" sang out Toni, in much concern and with a wealth of Gallic gestures, as his employer trotted past.

"*Point de danger!*" idly returned Barry, in passing. "*Soyez tranquille!*"

He spoke with an unconcern he did not feel; and on much the same principle that sometimes made Zit yawn and pretend to snooze when a wave of incipient fear swept the sheep. Barry knew his own seeming indifference to the phenomenon would do more to reassure Toni than would all the calming arguments he could offer.

To a man, newly engaged to the girl of his heart, it takes more than a mere earthquake and the memory of a drawn pistol, to dull the edge of his happiness.

And, before he had turned in at the gate of the ranch house, Barry Gale found himself singing blithely, and off-key, in a way that made stray passersby turn to look after him as he rode.

Dick O'Rell had not come home, when Gale sat down to lunch. This did not worry the rancher; as he and Dick seldom met at the noon meal. One or the other of them was almost certain to be on some distant part of the land; in which case a pocketed sandwich served the absentee for luncheon. Yet, to-day, Barry regretted his partner's absence. He wanted to tell him about his engagement to Maida; and to gush in callow fashion about her myriad charms. He felt as though he had come out of long darkness into glorious light. And he wanted to tell the whole world of his joy.

After lunch, Barry went out to the ranch labors he had neglected so shamefully all morning.

"I'd hate to be a Mormon!" he mused, whimsically, as he strode toward the paddies. "Think of all the days' work they must lose, in courting!"

It was twilight when he got back to the house; having caught up in a measure with his postponed tasks. He was comfortably tired. Roy, who had been at his heels all afternoon, did not share his master's sense of physical well-being.

The collie was restless, uneasy, plainly in distress. Instead of ranging the fields, he stuck close to Gale; and at intervals whined and thrust his hot nose into Barry's hand and looked up in mute appeal at the man. Once or twice, as Gale paused to pat him or to seek the cause of the dog's manifest uneasiness, Roy would

glance fearfully to eastward, where Lassen tinged the dusk with a smear of lurid glow. Then he would look up again into Barry's face and whimper.

"I know, old chap!" soothed Barry, as they entered the dooryard and as Roy's latest stare at the distant volcano brought forth from his furry throat a sound that only his innate pluck was able to transform from a howl to an inquiring whine. "I know. The earthquake atmosphere and the eruption have got you. They've got me, too. But let's try not to think about them, shan't we? Just remember the old Scotch proverb that says 'a collie has the brain of a man and the ways of a woman!' and don't be a crybaby. Buck up!"

At the cheer in Gale's voice, the dog wagged his plumed tail, and essayed a very gallant bark indeed. The bark,—as a bark,—was a failure; even though the intent was good. Fearless of any natural or normal foe, yet this touch of the supernatural was beginning to fray the collie's hair-trigger nerves. Like Señora and Barry's sheep, Roy seemed to read a message in the eruption and in the earthquake thrills that humans' grosser senses could not grasp.

Dick did not respond to Barry's hail from the front door. But the call brought Chang scuttling out from the kitchen regions with word that O'Rell had returned home half an hour earlier, and, not finding Gale, had gone out again.

It was not Dick O'Rell's way, to set forth from the house, once he had come back to it. He was a hard worker. But when his day's toil was ended, he loved

to lounge lazily on the porch or at the hearth, until supper was ready.

Yet Barry thought he understood. Returning home, and finding his cousin still out, Dick undoubtedly had fared to Gopher Hill, to continue his obsessing pursuit of digging for the elusive Ruggles' gold cache.

The day's happenings had driven the very thought of that quest from Barry Gale's mind. Now, eager to see Dick and to tell him the wondrous news, as well as to have another try for the buried ingots, he hurried off for the hill, through the gathering darkness. Not until he had gotten to the very foot of the slope did he discover two vexing facts. First, that he had not brought along his flashlight, which most assuredly would be needed if any night-digging were to be done. Second, that Roy had followed him and was breasting the crumbly steep ascent at his side.

He had meant to leave the collie at home. For, on so secret an enterprise, Roy's bark or even his crashing plunges through the underbrush might call casual outsiders' attention to the diggers' presence.

Now, glancing down at the dog in the faint lurid light from the far off fire-mountain, Gale had not the heart to send him all the way back. Instead, he pointed to the ground. Instantly, at the familiar signal, Roy dropped, and lay still.

"Stay there!" commanded Barry, gently, as he stooped to pat the collie's head. "*Stay there!*"

And, leaving the sorely disappointed dog staring wistfully after him, Barry mounted the dark hill. He knew that, under any ordinary circumstances, Roy

would stay where his master had told him to stay;— would stay all night, if need be. And he dismissed the incident from his mind.

Climbing, he came to the manzanita thicket. Skirting this, to the left, he prepared to enter from the more familiar point where he had emerged from it that morning. From there, he knew he could find his way, by sense of direction, in three steps, to the tangle of roots where the spade and the pick were hidden.

There, doubtless, already, Dick O'Rell was at work over the trough that had held the ingot. Yet, as he rounded the far corner of the copse, within a few yards of the cache, it suddenly occurred to Barry as odd that he heard no sound of digging nor the grate of pick or spade against the sides of buried stones.

Barry paused to listen. Not a sound broke the hill's desolate stillness ahead of him. It was evident he had been mistaken in thinking Dick had come up here. More likely, O'Rell had walked down to Red Bluff for the mail; not knowing Barry had gotten it that morning.

As there was less than no use in trying to pursue the digging alone and without so much as a single flashlight, Barry halted his leisurely steps, not six feet from the new burial place of the ingot. He turned halfway around, to go back the way he had come. Then, into his mind, came an illogical desire to look at the trough whence Dick had taken two bars of gold in two days. There was no possible chance, of course, that another ingot could have been deposited there,

since morning. Yet, there was no sane reason why the two other bars should have been there.

Half contemptuous of his senseless impulse, Gale stepped into the darkness of the thicket.

There, pausing, he felt downward for the trough; stooping quickly. And, to bending his head when he did, Barry Gale owed the fact that he continued to stay on earth.

For, with a whizzing sound, something spun past his ear, through the spot where his skull had been, a tenth of a second earlier. The thing which so narrowly grazed him brushed past, with a swishing noise that ended in a thump.

Barry, in the dimness, saw the head of a pickaxe imbed itself in the soil beside his downreaching right hand. The mighty blow, aimed by strong and accurate arms, from behind, had missed its mark, through no clumsiness of the man who smote.

By the time the pick struck into the ground, Barry instinctively wheeled about. Close against him was the figure of a man,—blurred and indistinct in the gloom of the copse. The man was still bending to wrench the pick from its earthy bed. Barry grappled him.

There was no need for words. The stranger's murderous purpose was clear as day. And only by physical strength could Gale hope to combat it. Even as he gripped the man, Gale noted subconsciously that his opponent was shorter and stockier than Wolfe Naylor. Yet, for the life of him, he could not imagine any other person on earth, than Naylor, seeking to kill him.

The man loosed his hold on the stubborn pick. He

flung long and sinewy arms about Gale, and wrestled with maniac vehemence to throw the rancher. But Barry had the advantage of grip. In his instinctive tackling of the Unknown, he had dived for his middle; and had secured the underhold.

All the other's furious writhings and grappling failed to shake this hold. Gale clasped his fingers behind the small of his antagonist's back, and drove his chin into the hollow under the other's collarbone; then braced his feet for the terrible, if simple, oldtime wrestling device that has cracked or maimed so many amateur athletes' spines.

The process, in this underhold grip, is purely scientific. By thrusting forward sharply with the chin, against the adversary's collarbone or upper chest, and at the same time forcing the imprisoned waistline forward with the clenched handgrip, one of two results is obtained; unless the hold can be broken or blocked. Either the spine (forced outward from above and inward from below) will succumb under the irresistible strain, or else the tortured victim must save himself by surrender or by a deliberate fall.

The Unknown battled with desperate strenuousness and in dead silence. By every atom of strength and trickery in his power he strove to break the merciless hold. But Barry Gale was a strong man, in the pink of condition and with a football record behind him. Moreover, he was minded to punish his would-be slayer. And he was stung by the continuous mystery of the attacks on him. Grimly he braced every muscle,

and tightened to the point of anguish the pressure he was exerting on the other's spine.

His foe tore at him, with talon fingers, to break the grip. He twisted, serpentlike, in the steel grasp. He stabbed with stiff forefingers at Gale's eyes, to blind him. But Barry, with true fighting instinct, eluded the foul tactics, and pressed his chin the more agonizingly into the other's upper chest.

Presently, as they swayed and battled in their silent and raging embrace of death, there amid the acrid-smelling stems of manzanita, Gale heard his opponent groan aloud. And he felt the straining muscles collapse within his clasp. His assailant, through pain or terror, apparently, had swooned.

Barry loosened his own death-tight grip, to allow the supine man to slide to the ground. Instead, on the instant the hold was loosened to the least degree, there was a sudden thrill of life through the collapsed body. Barry took warning, at once, and made to renew his hold. But before he could tighten his arms the other had ducked under them, with the speed of lightning and plunged past him through the thicket.

Gale made a futile clutch at the darting body as it dashed by. But he missed. And the reason for his missing was the momentary glimpse he had gotten of his adversary's face as the man sped past. The sight jolted Gale into lightning-brief inactivity; and in this flash of time he lost his one chance to capture the fugitive.

For, as the man slipped, eel-like, through the loosened underhold and sprang back, the two combat-

ants' heads were, for a tenth of a second perhaps, within three inches of each other. A gap made by the displacing of a wide-branched manzanita bush, during the scrimmage, let in a faint ray of light from above. The darkness that brooded over the hill was tinged with the fiery glow from Lassen. And by that dim radiance Barry had seen his enemy, face to face.

The glimmer was by far too feeble to reveal the other's features or to make the face itself anything but a whitish blur. But, out of that dull blur had gleamed the same wide, weirdly luminous black eyes that had peered at Barry out of the darkness beyond his window; two nights in succession.

The weakly ruddy glint from the sky had caught the eyes and had made them stand out, glowing and malignant, from the indistinct face, itself. There was no mistaking them.

All this in the merest imperceptible instant of time; but long enough to check involuntarily Barry's clutch at his fleeing foe.

Then, the weird spell was gone; and Gale was crashing angrily through the dark bushes in hot chase of the Unknown.

Once or twice, in the next second or so, he caught shadowy glimpses of him, slipping rapidly through apertures in the thicket; and he heard the heavy, rapid padding of feet.

Then he lost sight and sound of the fellow. As Barry emerged from the thicket's far end, there was no sign of the man he pursued. Strain his ears as he

would, he could get no slightest echo of the other's running feet, through the hillside stillness.

It was as though the rocky earth had opened and engulfed him.

Barry stopped, and stared about him through the almost impenetrable gloom. The crawling wall of volcanic smoke had spread, by now, wellnigh across the entire heavens; blotting out the huge friendly Northern California stars. Except at intervals, when the volcanic light pulsed upward for a few seconds, the night was densely black.

Barry recognized the uselessness of following aimlessly an invisible and soundless enemy through the utter darkness. He waited a minute longer, listening; in the hope that a stumble in the darkness or the falling of a displaced stone might give him a clue to his late assailant's direction.

But silence brooded everywhere;—a tense, breathless silence, that seemed as abnormal as did the recurrent dimly lurid glare in the skies. And, under the listening man's feet, as he stood there, the earth once more rocked and heaved;—this time with a swaying jar that wellnigh threw him headlong. On the heels of the earthquake shock, the long and lugubrious howl of a dog split the hushed silence.

"Here, Roy!" called Barry, remembering belatedly that he had left his collie with orders not to stir. "Here! Up here!"

As he spoke, his hand chanced to touch his side pocket. And he felt there the bulk of the pistol he had taken from Naylor. "I'm a fine man in an emer-

gency!" he scoffed, half-aloud. "Here I had a gun in my clothes; and a dog within call. And I didn't make use of either of them! With one or both, I'd have been able to lay him by the heels in no time!"

Bounding eagerly up the steep slope, came Roy; overjoyed at the permission to rejoin his master;—gladder still for human companionship at an hour when nature's mighty jests were shaking the earth and reddening the sky.

Together, dog and man made their way down to the level ground and back to the ranch house. On their arrival, Barry found Dick O'Rell had not yet reached home. It was a little past the supper hour. In all their years together Gale had seldom known his partner to be late to his eagerly anticipated evening meal.

Barry stood, in the hallway, pondering; trying not to let himself worry at O'Rell's odd lateness. His mind was still haunted by the eyes of the mysterious man there on the hill-shoulder; the man who had so unaccountably traced the ingot to their house, the night before, and who now had sought to kill Gale as the rancher was exploring the spot whence the ingot had been found.

But Barry was relieved, permanently, of one queer dread that, against his will, had haunted him. This creature with the mysterious luminous eyes was a human, like himself. There was nothing supernatural about him. It had been solid and muscular flesh-and-blood which had writhed so furiously in Gale's grip.

Somehow, this knowledge was soothing. But there was nothing soothing in Dick O'Rell's almost unprece-

dented lateness. And, despite himself, Barry worried over it.

Just as he was telling himself he was a fool and an old Betty to allow himself to fret over a wholly natural thing like a man's tardiness in coming home to supper, the telephone bell in a corner of the hall rang with sharp insistence.

Annoyed at his own startled haste, he ran to the instrument; prepared to hear Dick's voice in a request that he wait supper no longer for the absentee, but save something cold for his return. But it was not O'Rell whose summons to the telephone had broken in on Barry's suspense. It was Maida Drace.

"Is that you, Barry?" she called, in answer to his hello; and before he could speak she hurried on: "Oh, come here as quickly as you possibly can, Barry! Come, NOW!"

"What is it?" he asked in quick alarm at the break in her tone and at the stark terror which underlay her words. "What is wrong?"

"I—I can't explain, over the telephone!" she made answer. "But come! Come as quickly as you can. It—it's terribly important!"

"I'll be there as quickly as Señora can carry me!" he promised. "And, whatever's the matter, you're not to be frightened. Whatever it is, we'll straighten it, somehow."

He turned away from the telephone, and caught up a flashlight from the table. His face and his heart were full of indefinable fear for the girl he loved. She, who had shown mere curiosity at the earth's

trembling, and who had intervened, unafraid, between himself and Wolfe Naylor's pistol,—she was in dire fear. And she was calling for him!

As Barry left the instrument, he found Toni at his elbow. The Basco had come in by way of the wide open front door, without knocking; and stood watching his employer with troubled interest. He could have understood no word of the telephone conversation; but Barry's intonations and his clouded face spoke clearly enough of something far out of the way.

The herder's own dark visage took on a look of unhappy concern, as might that of a dog which saw its master was in distress. He backed toward the door, mumbling, in his barbarous Pyrenees dialect:

"I came for liniment for a lamb that was crushed against the side of the fold when the sheep jostled each other, just now, at the earth's shaking. But it can wait, if you are in haste. Can I help you, *mon maitre?*"

"Yes," replied Barry, without pausing in his fast progress through the house and toward the stable. "You can tell Mr. O'Rell, when he comes back, that I have gone to Mr. Drace's house. He can call me up, there, if he needs me for anything. I don't know when I shall be back. Chang will get you the liniment."

He called the words over his shoulder; Toni following along to hear them. In another minute, Gale had flung a saddle on Señora and was thundering out along the road toward the Drace estate. In his ears, as he

rode, echoed the strange tone of fright in Maida's voice. And, he wondered much at its cause.

For a moment he fancied there might have been a distressing scene with her father over the tidings of her engagement to so obscure an outsider as himself; and that she was summoning her lover to add his pleas to hers. Then, knowing Maida as he did, he dismissed this notion as unlikely; and sought further for the explanation.

Into the gray State highway he galloped; and along it; Señora's ringing avalanche of hoofbeats waking echoes from hill to hill, as she swept on. Above, the crawling pall of murk from Mount Lassen had by this time covered the whole sky; blotting out all the stars and plunging the world into thick darkness;—a darkness relieved only by the ever-brighter and more frequent pulses of lurid glare from the volcano-pit.

Giving Señora her head and trusting only to her horsesense to make her keep the road, Barry urged her on. And the highspirited mare needed scant urging.

By a gleam from the volcano, Gale saw just ahead of him the driveway, leading through the trees to Drace's squat gray house. He turned the mare into the drive. And again, her horse sense kept her in the roadway, despite its many turns and twists.

As he came out into the little hummock-strewn clearing, in front of the house, Gale saw there were lights only on the ground floor. By their ray, he guided his sweating mare to a shed at the corner of the stables; hastily tied her there, out of the wind.

He ran across the clearing to the house. Not a,

soul had been in sight as he galloped up. No one had appeared from the stables; nor did any light shine from them.

But now, as he hurried up the steps, the house's front door opened. Maida stood on the wide threshold, shading her eyes with her hand and looking out. At sight of Gale, she exclaimed:

"Oh, you've really come, Barry! I was sure I heard a horse's hoofs. But then I've been as sure of it, every minute since I telephoned you. Come in!"

She drew him into the house and closed and barred the big door behind her. Barry noted that the touch of her hand was like ice; and that her great dark eyes glowed in all-repressed fright, from a haggard, colorless face.

"What's the matter?" he begged, in loverly anxiety. "Tell me, sweetheart! Has your father——?"

"Oh, poor, *poor* Father!" she broke in, her eyes filling with tears. "He has suffered so! And I never even dreamed he——"

"Does he know you sent for me?" asked Barry, surprised at her keen pity for the man who had neglected her so. "Is he willing for me to come here?"

"Willing?" she repeated. "Indeed he is! You're his only hope, I'm afraid. He won't let me send to Red Bluff for the police. And he——"

"For the police?" echoed Barry, amazed. "What for?"

"Wait!" she commanded. "I'll tell you all about it. Just as he told it to me, half an hour ago, as nearly as I can understand it. Then I'll take you in to him.

He's in his study; sitting there in a sort of daze, with a rifle across his knees. He——"

"A rifle? What on earth——?"

"Listen. I'll try to tell it to you as quickly and as clearly as I can. There's so much of it, though,—the financial part,—that I don't quite see! Never mind. Here is what happened:

"When I got home at lunchtime, I went to his study, to tell him about—about us. The door was locked. I could hear his voice and Mr. Naylor's. They were having a fearful quarrel. But this time Father was answering him, bravely; and not cringing to him at all. I couldn't hear their words. I didn't try to. But,—oh it was like the sound of two growling mastiffs, making ready to spring at each other's throats. Of course, I couldn't go in there, when Mr. Naylor was with him; and tell him we are engaged. But I went back to his door, three or four times, during the afternoon; and every time, I could hear their voices;—sometimes, loud, sometimes low, but always with that mastiff-growl in them."

"But——"

"Then, an hour ago, while I was in my room, dressing for dinner, Father called me. I went to his study. He was all alone there. Mr. Naylor had gone. Father looked as if he had been through a fearful illness. He was crouching over, cleaning a rifle. And he told me to come in and sit down. For a minute he didn't say anything; but kept on cleaning the rifle. And,—and I told him you and I were engaged. He just nodded; as if he hardly heard me. Then, all at once he began to

“speak. And he told me the story I’m going to tell you. Perhaps I’d better begin it at the very beginning; the way he did.”

She drew a long, quivering breath, and continued :

“Three or four years ago, Father and one or two other financiers decided,—from the way things were going in Europe and here,—something about the shakiness of national credits and the inflation of currency, and other things that are more or less Greek to me,—they decided that gold was the one standard of value which could never collapse; and that the more all the other forms of currency and securities, and all that, should collapse, the higher would be the value of gold and the harder it would be to get gold. So, with Father in charge of the syndicate, they began to buy up as much of the gold supply as they could get hold of. They were going to hold it until a panic or a national crash of some kind, and then sell it at an enormous profit. One of the men died, and the two others backed out, after a while. But Father kept on. That’s just like him. He never gives up a plan, once he is launched on it. He bought in the other men’s supply; and presently he had a little more than twenty million dollars’ worth of gold, all his own.”

Barry whistled, under his breath, his mind staggering at the magnitude of the sum. Maida went on :

“He was afraid the government might commandeer this gold, in case of a general panic. I believe there’s some law, isn’t there, against keeping great quantities of gold out of circulation? So he had it melted, secretly, into bars, of different sizes and weights, and

had the bars painted black. Then, by using his railroad power, he got them shipped, under some other name,—I don't know what,—out to California. He had bought this place and had had a specially constructed cellar made, under the house, here, to hold the gold. He was afraid to take anyone into his confidence except his secretary. Mr. Naylor had served him faithfully and cleverly for years. And he had been of a great deal of use in acting as an agent in the secret buying of bullion. So he and Mr. Naylor came out here. And, to make sure no robbers should ever discover the gold was under the house, they hired guards,—twenty of them—to pretend to be patrolling the place for trespassers. Mr. Naylor hired them, in the East, to be more certain the secret shouldn't get out, here."

"Melted into bars, . . . painted black!" Barry found himself muttering; even through his breathless interest in the recital.

"Then," pursued Maida, "they decided the house wasn't a safe enough place for the gold, for fear there might be a fire, sometime, and people might run in to help extinguish it and happen into the cellar. So they imported a gang of laborers to build an enormous concrete-and-steel vault, down in the gorge; so the gold could be kept there; and guarded night and day. They only finished transporting it down there, yesterday."

Gale recalled the line of burden-bearers he had seen from the upper window, creeping from the cellar.

"But that's only the prelude to the real story," said Maida. "The real—the *horrible* story!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

M AIDA hesitated an instant, as though marshalling facts which she found hard to voice. Then she continued:

“For months after they came out here, Father noticed that Wolfe Naylor was growing more and more self-assertive and arrogant; and less the perfect machinelike secretary of old. He thought little enough of it. For Mr. Naylor was sharing with him the big secret and in a measure he was responsible for the gold’s safety. You see,—though Father didn’t say it,—the presence of the gold must have begun, even then, to have a strange, malign sort of effect on them both. I’ve read that it does, so often! Though I don’t know why. Don’t you remember, clear back to the Nibelungen myths, how the guarding of vast masses of gold has always warped and changed peoples’ natures? Well, out here, in this loneliness, I suppose they both grew more and more nervous and frightened, for fear the twenty million dollars’ worth of gold bars would somehow be stolen from them.

“Father grew thin and old, worrying over it. When he had been guiding financial destinies, back East, they never had such an effect on him. But, here, the actual gold itself,—the magic metal of fortune,—preyed on him, night and day, he says. He grew secretive and frightened. He was afraid the government might find

out he had it, in spite of all his precautions, and might force him to sell it back to the Treasury. He was afraid desperadoes might get an inkling of its presence and come here in force and overpower the guards and loot the concrete vaults. He was afraid of a million things."

Barry conjured up a vision of Jared Drace's face and his furtive manner and his dread of having outsiders at the house. And he began to understand.

"Mr. Naylor was even worse than Father," said Maida. "He thought every innocent trespasser was either a thief or a Federal agent. Father says the gold and its safety had become the most important thing in Mr. Naylor's life. It seems I came upon them at the gorge that afternoon, just as he and the guards were beginning to fill the third of the three concrete compartments of the vault, with the sacks of gold. They were all keyed up, and on the lookout for danger. So, when Mr. Naylor saw you standing there, looking down at them and apparently spying on the work, he lost his head and fired. He told Father it would have been better to kill you and hide your body somewhere than to let you go away and tell people you had seen them loading gold bars into the vault."

"But I hadn't seen!" objected Barry. "I caught a glimpse of the vault door. Then I saw you. And after I once set eyes on you——"

"I know. But he thought you had seen and that you might tell. Even when Father told him who you were and that you were an old friend of mine and not a thief or an agent of the government,—he still insisted

you had seen and that you'd tell. And he wanted you put out of the way. He said," with an involuntary shudder, "that it would be better to kill you and hide you away than to have a gang of holdups or a band of Federal agents swooping down on the gold, as they would if you should say what you had seen. He didn't know you hadn't been standing on that ridge above the gorge, for several minutes, watching them. The guard Mr. Naylor had placed there, on the ridge, had come down to help hoist some of the gold from the trucks into the vault. Then, Father says, Mr. Naylor was all the more convinced you were spying on him, because afterward he saw you watch the moving of more of the gold from the cellar to the trucks. That's why he attacked you, when he met you in the library."

"Never mind about me," suggested Barry. "I think I can piece together as much of the story as concerns myself. Go ahead with the rest of it."

"Then," she went on, with a trace of reluctance, "came the—the time I told you about,—when Mr. Naylor made love to me. Father was furious at him and ordered him to leave. Mr. Naylor went into the study, instead, and explained very calmly that Father could not get rid of him. He explained that a word from him would bring the authorities down on the place; or that an interview from him in any newspaper would set all the robbers in America to making efforts to steal the gold. He went on to say that the guards were men he himself had chosen and that he had chosen them carefully. He said they were devoted to him;

and that at a word from him, they'd gladly help him snatch the gold from Father."

"Did the blackmailing cur say that?" cried Barry. "The——!"

"There were only two things Father could do," resumed Maida, her sweet voice kept steady by manifest effort. "He could defy him to do his worst,—and be robbed of the vast wealth he had piled up with such care and which had come to mean so terribly much to him. Or he could let Mr. Naylor stay on here, until such time as we could find a way out of the man's power;—until Father could communicate with some colleague in the East whom he could trust; and have the gold hidden somewhere else. You know, this gold speculation is only one of Father's several big ventures. It doesn't represent the bulk of his fortune, he says;—even though he has turned his back on all his other enterprises till this one could be put through. And, when he set out on this gold-hoarding, the spirit of the gold itself hadn't yet gotten into his blood. Well, as I told you, there were two things he could do. And he chose the course that would save his beloved gold from peril.

"You mustn't blame him," she hastened on. "It had become a real obsession with him. And besides, as I said, he can never bear to give up any course he has once firmly embarked on. That's one of the reasons for his success, I think. So he pretended to yield to Mr. Naylor's wishes. Even while he loathed him. He tried to make me promise to be civil to him; but I couldn't be. Mr. Naylor seemed willing to wait for me

to change my feelings toward him. So Father thought we could have a breathing space, till he could figure out some way of getting free from the fellow's power. For the moment, he couldn't do anything; unless he wanted to lose his gold. And things rested that way, till this noon."

Again she paused. Then, more firmly, she continued:

"Mr. Naylor came back here after we met him in the road, outside of Red Bluff, to-day. He went straight to the study. Father says he was perfectly insane with rage. He told Father you and I were engaged; and he ordered Father not only to break off the engagement, but to force me to marry him. As if he could! He said he was sick of waiting; and of seeing another man making love to me. He gave Father his choice of letting me marry him or of losing the gold. And Father behaved splendidly."

"It was high time!" commented Barry;—but he did not say it aloud.

"When it came to a question of losing the gold or of wrecking my life," said Maida, "all the strange obsession dropped away from him; and he became his old self. He refused. And he challenged Mr. Naylor to do his worst. They had a horrible quarrel over it. It lasted for hours. Mr. Naylor bullied and threatened and even entreated. But Father was firm about it, all through. He had become sane; now that it was my life-happiness which was at stake. At the very last, Mr. Naylor said: 'By sunrise, the vault down there will be empty!' And Father answered, quietly: 'If it

is, then by sunset you will be in prison, along with the guards you've corrupted.' Wasn't it fine of Father, though!"

"Yes," admitted Gale. "But what——"

"Mr. Naylor just looked at him, a second, and then said: 'If there aren't any witnesses against us, no one can jail us or guess what we have done. I've discharged the Chinaboys, to-day. Sludge is blind and doesn't count. That's why you brought him out here. As for Miss Maida,—well, a wife can't testify against her own husband. And she's going to be my wife, by to-morrow. *You* won't testify against us. Because you won't be where you can do it. That disposes of any witnesses.' Then he went out. And Father called to me. He——"

"Do you think——?" began Gale, choking with mingled rage and amazement.

"I don't know what to think!" wailed the girl. "That's why I telephoned you. I believe Father is in terrible danger. Wolfe Naylor is capable of getting the gold; and then of killing him, to keep him from setting the law after the thieves. He's entirely capable of it. I know that. He's desperate. The gold has turned his brain. But," she interrupted herself, "what do you suppose he meant by saying I'd marry him by to-morrow? That crazy speech alone proves he's lost his mind. He must know I'd never marry him! What——"

"It doesn't matter what he meant by saying it," replied Barry, white-lipped and grim. "Because, whatever he meant, he'll never get a chance to come within

a hundred feet of you. I swear that! Still, if you think he'll carry out his threat of looting the vault, you must telephone the police, at once. Why hasn't your father done it?"

"He won't!" she sobbed. "I begged him to. But he still has a faint hope that Mr. Naylor won't go so far. And by telephoning the police, he would give away the secret of the gold. So he just hesitates, and mutters to himself, and cleans and loads that rifle of his. At one moment, he says he'll give them a warm welcome if they try to break into the house. And at the next, he says he is going down to the gorge and stand guard over the gold and kill the first of them that comes near the vault. The strain has been too much for him. He's hardly himself. He's capable of doing anything. Oh, won't you go in and talk to him about it? Persuade him he ought to telephone the police, right away! He——"

"Yes," assented Barry, striding toward the study. "I'll tell him so. If he won't do it, I'll telephone them, myself."

"The stables and the courtyard and even the barracks all seem deserted," she said, as she followed him. "I looked out of the windows and——"

He threw ajar the study door. A table light was burning. The room was empty. One of the windows stood wide open. On its catch was a shred of grayish cloth;—remnant of the suit Barry remembered Drace's wearing when he had visited the room before.

"He's gone!" exclaimed Gale; as Maida cried out.

"No," he added, noting her terror and seeking to

quiet it. "They haven't got him. He left the room of his own accord. See, there are no signs of violence. And we were right in the hall, next to the study. We'd have heard. He went, himself; and in a hurry; and," after another exploratory glance, "he took his rifle with him. He——"

"That means he's done as he threatened and gone down to the gorge," cried Maida, "to stand guard over the vault! Oh, what chance will such a poor frail old man have against——?"

"I don't know what chance he'd stand, alone," broke in Barry. "But he's not going to be alone. He can't have had more than a very few minutes' start, if he was still here when I came. I'm going after him. We'll see this through, together, he and I. Now, telephone the police, sweetheart, as quickly as you can! I'm off! Good bye. Here!" turning back from the window as he was about to jump through to the ground. "Take this thing; in case any of them come back while I'm gone. Take it. And as soon as you've telephoned, lock yourself in some room that has a good stout door. Good bye!"

As he spoke he thrust into her trembling hand the automatic pistol he had taken from Wolfe Naylor. But her eye had fallen on a sheet of paper, pinned in the centre of the wide red blotter on the table. And she read aloud:

"I've gone down there to keep watch. Don't be frightened, little daughter. I have handled worse situations. I am still their master, and I'll prove it to

them. For fear you might disobey me and send for the police and betray everything,—I am cutting the telephone wires.”

Gale waited not an instant longer. With one bound he was through the window and on the ground.

As he sped across the clearing, he noticed that the red volcanic light had increased threefold, in the past few minutes; and that its glow lessened the darkness almost as much as might a full moon hidden behind a bank of clouds. He had drawn his flashlight, but he had no need for it, to guide him across this open space. So he saved its rays for the greater gloom of the woods ahead.

Into the forest he dashed; stumbling, once or twice almost falling; but ever keeping on as rapidly as he could travel; and bearing in as exact a line as possible, toward the gorge that branched off from Iron Canyon, far in front of him.

As he ran, certain subconscious thoughts pierced his eager anxiety and the astonishment of the story he had just heard. Oddly enough, these thoughts played around a single detail of Maida's recital. She had said the twenty million dollars' worth of gold was melted down into bars of various sizes and that these were painted black to disguise their nature.

If these bars were all supposed to be hidden in the strange concrete-and-steel vault, then how did at least two of them chance to be lying in the trough of ground on Gopher Hill; nearly half a mile from the gorge? Gold was not a substance so paltry, nor were ingots of

that size so valueless, that two bars could have been dropped by the wayside in transit and left there neglected for the first passerby to pick up and to cache on Gopher Hill.

But, in his mad haste, he had scant scope for thinking. He sped on; not forming any definite plan of action to be carried out when he should reach the gorge. Once, he blamed himself for having come through the woods on foot, instead of making better time by riding. But, as he tripped over tree-roots and collided with boulders, he realized how poor progress Señora or any other steed could have made over such a course.

Again, as he ran, he paused for an instant. It seemed to his keyed-up senses that he heard someone running through the woods behind him. But as he listened, he caught no further sound of steps; and he hastened on again, sure he had been mistaken. A second time, nearly at the gorge's edge, he listened. For his brain had tricked him into thinking he heard not only the impact of running feet but the tread of a horse, somewhere in the wooded forest he had just traversed.

But now, he had no further heed to give to imagination's antics. For he was breasting the upcurled lip of the gorge, some hundred yards from its lower opening. Keeping along this crest, he ran for the gorge mouth, where the vault had been dug.

Here, free from trees and with only a few stray chapparal clumps scattered about, the glare from the ruddy sky made his way plainer. He pocketed the

flashlight, and ran cautiously among the basalt boulders and over the rubble.

Mount Lassen, to the left, was glowing like an evil furnace. An indefinable throbbing sound pulsed through all the air. The wind had fallen; and the chilly night atmosphere hung heavy as wet leather and almost as hard to breathe. Ahead, and with its source hidden by the rise of ground, flared a suffused light that was not from the sky.

Clambering over a mighty cropping of rock, Barry was on top of the gorge mouth, and looking into the hollow fifty feet below him. He halted, lying flat; and stared directly down at the queer scene at his feet.

There was a group of gasoline flares set in the earth, some few feet from the cut the laborers had blasted in the bottom of the gorge. By their waveringly brilliant glow, Barry could see the great steel door of the vault, standing wide open. On the ground directly in front of the door was a small pile of black bars and of fat and bumpy canvas sacks.

Apparently, the looting of the vault was well under way;—or had been until a very recent interruption had checked it, temporarily. His own head and body still in darkness, on the bush-strewn summit of the gorge, Barry could see with sharp distinctness everything that went on in the flare-lighted area below him. And, at a glance, he saw what had caused the interruption in the looting process.

Standing a little in front of the opened vault,—his bared head erect, his tired old eyes flaming, his white hair dank about his livid face,—Jared Drace was con-

fronting a group of khaki-clad men. Panting from the fatigue of his long run, he nevertheless glared at them in fearless rage; and if the old hands shook on the rifle he leveled, the shaking was not so apparent as to justify a belief in Drace's inability to take good aim at such close range.

The financier was berating the knot of irresolute guards, in loud fury;—threatening them with dire legal punishment if they did not disperse at once and leave the spot;—threatening with instant death the first of them who should take a single step nearer to the vault.

From his vantage point, high above, Barry Gale could not see Naylor in the half-scared, half-puzzled bunch of guards. And he leaned a few inches farther forward, to locate his arch-enemy, before he himself should climb down the steep rock-lip and take his place beside the father of the girl he loved.

But still, he could not see Wolfe Naylor. He did see, however, the little pile of rifles the guards had stacked as they had toiled to carry out the ingots to load into the trucks that stood hard by. And he saw that Drace's chance position between the men and the weapons accounted for his ability to cow them into momentary hesitancy.

Still farther, Gale leaned over the rock-lip in his quest for Wolfe Naylor. And as he leaned, he felt—rather than heard—some one behind him leap forward. Barry turned his head in belated haste.

He was barely in time to see, in the darkness, a man stoop swiftly down and seize him by the ankles. Be-

fore he could rise or even brace himself on the slippery rock-edge, his feet were swung from the ground; and his whole body was propelled forward over the edge of the cliff.

With a frantic clutch to save himself from the fifty-foot drop on the head among the stones below, his fingers closed about a tiny bush that juttred out from a pocket of dirt on the rock. The fragile shrub came away in his grasp. Yet, first, it had enough resisting power to enable him to fling himself to one side and to frustrate that first fierce thrust of the hands which grasped his ankles.

The aggressor threw all his strength into a second heave of the helplessly prone rancher's body. But before he could exert the leverage he required, another figure,—indistinct as the first,—flashed out of the gloom, behind, and flung itself upon the assailant.

Barry, swinging around, as the hands suddenly released his ankles, got to his feet, and bent over the two madly wrestling bodies.

The struggle was of wildcat intensity. But it was as brief as it was deadly. The newcomer had taken Barry's opponent by surprise. Moreover, he seemed possessed of herculean strength. In a mere handful of seconds, he had the other man helpless on his back, with one arm under him and the other pinned to his chest by his victor's knee.

Then, in tigerish ferocity, the conqueror dug his ten fingers into his fallen antagonist's windpipe. There was a hideous gurgling sound from the victim; as the

other's hands choked deeper and deeper into his wind-pipe.

At that instant, Barry Gale found and turned on his flashlight; playing its swordlike white rays full on the two writhing figures.

The blaze of light revealed to him Toni, kneeling on the breast of the man who had sought to hurl Barry over the rock-lip. The Basco's yellow teeth were agleam and in his topaz eyes blazed red murder. His mighty hands were white to the knuckles with the death-grip he was exerting on his foe's throat.

"I pay half the debt, *mon maitre!*" croaked the herder as the light's beams struck him. "I pay it. You saved me from two serpents that would kill me. I save you to-night from a serpent that jumped out of that bush-clump at you, as I came up. I knew there was need of a friend. I knew it from your face when you left the ranch house. So I followed. And I followed when you ran from that gray house, back yonder, and came here. I pay!"

But Barry did not hear him. His whole mind and imagination were taken up by what his second glance at the two men had shown.

Shifting his gaze at once from Toni to the man beneath him, Barry had seen a distorted face turned upward in anguish. And from that face glowed two huge luminous black eyes;—the eyes of a snake, magnified tenfold;—the eyes that had peered in at him, through the ranch house window;—the eyes he had seen for so brief an instant that very evening, in the blurred face of the Unknown who had attacked him on Gopher Hill.

There could be no mistaking those eyes. The man who had been haunting him, so mysteriously,—the man who had stolen the ingot from the ranch house living room and who had thrown Roy off the scent by cayenne,—the man who had striven to kill him in the manzanita clump and again, a minute ago, here on the lip of the cliff,—this mystic enemy lay pinioned and in agony at his feet!

Then, as Barry gazed in wonder,—as the merciless white flashlight rays poured into the conquered man's face,—those strange luminous eyes underwent a miraculous change.

At contact with the powerful light, a swift gray film spread itself over the eyes;—the film that covers no eyes save those of the blind.

And Sludge, the sightless and severely correct valet, was lying there, gurgling and strangling in Toni's iron grip!

"A—a—a *nyctalops*!" stammered Gale, in bewildered incredulity; the lore of clinic and of professional practice coming back to him as he stared. "A *nyctalops*! The second I've seen in all my life! I don't believe there are three of them in America!"

His excited memory ranged back to a day during his last year at Johns Hopkins. To the class in Optics, the professor of that study had introduced a blind man whose unseeing eyes were filmed. The room had been plunged into darkness. Three minutes later, a light had been turned on the subject's face. And his eyes had been as the eyes of normal men; but more luminous and somewhat larger. Then, as the light smote his sen-

sitive pupils, the film had covered them protectingly again.

"Nyctalopia," had droned the professor (who was a positive genius at making interesting and unusual themes appear as dry as dust) "nyctalopia, as I have explained to you, gentlemen, is an abnormal condition of the visual nerve-centers, which permits of vision only in such markedly tempered light as that of evening or complete night time. In the presence of even moderate illumination the subject is completely blind. The condition is found among certain African tribes far more commonly than in civilized countries; though in the latter it is met with semi-occasionally in all grades of life. It was also known to the ancient Greeks; who coined for it the word 'nyctalopia'; from '*nux-nuktos*,' meaning 'night;' and '*ops*' signifying 'sight,' or 'vision.' The retina is normal under the following conditions only:——"

And, here, nearly four thousand miles away from that dusty classroom and nearly ten years later, Barry Gale came upon the solution of his own mystery, in the person of a supposedly stone-blind man!

But, almost at once, he roused himself from his daze of astonishment. He had not come out here to-night to attend to matters of his own selfish concern, but to aid Jared Drace. And in a flash, he came back to the actualities of his errand to the gorge.

"Don't kill him!" he commanded Toni. "And don't let him go. Tie him up, if you have any strong cord with you. If you haven't, use your belt and his own braces. Strips of his clothes, too, if you need

more bonds for him. And when he's trussed up so there's no chance of his getting free, come down where I'm going, if you really want to be of use. There's work for white men, to-night."

Turning, he moved back to the cliff; and to the view from which he had been absent for less than a minute in all. Yet, in his absence, he saw Jared Drace had shifted his position.

Still menacing the grouped guards with his leveled rifle,—still berating them fiercely in his high old voice,—Drace had backed closer to the vault. Now, he stood just outside its open doorway, guarding the heap of treasure at his feet and the far greater hoard of gold in the vault behind him.

There he took his stand; resolute, wrathful, fearless; his rifle menacing the shuffling men who looked longingly at their stacked rifles and sheepishly at one another and then in furtive threat at the single fragile figure which was holding them all at bay.

So intent were they on their own situation that neither the guards nor Drace himself noted Barry Gale's advent on the scene as with cautious speed he began to clamber down the rough and steep-sloping lip of the rock above their heads.

The light gave Barry ample opportunity to choose his foothold in the various juts and clefts in the surface of the cliff. And he descended rapidly; seldom taking his eyes from the gallant old man just beneath him.

Thus it was, when he was still some ten or twelve feet above Drace, he saw two long arms shoot forth

from the doorway of the vault; as Jared took a final backward step toward the aperture.

Wolfe Naylor, at work within the vault, had witnessed his employer's dramatic arrival on the scene. Having no pistol with him and a dash for the rifles being too needlessly perilous in face of Drace's own leveled weapon, the secretary had remained where he was; and had motioned his half-dozen fellow workers, (who were hoisting bags of ingots to the surface, from the vault's interior), to do the same.

Out of sight from the men who had passed from the vault with their loads and whom Drace's coming had surprised in the open, Naylor had no resource but to bide his time. And, in the meanwhile the trapped handful of guards facing Jared's rifle were masterless and uncertain; awaiting some sign or order from their new chief.

It was the luckless Drace himself who gave the secretary his chance; when he turned his back on the open vault and moved against the doorway to protect it from any possible rush by the guards. Then it was that Barry Gale saw Naylor's arms dart forth like twin snakes, toward the unsuspecting old man.

The outside group of guards saw, too, and their sullenness merged into broad grins. As Drace, suspecting, too late, half turned to see what they were grinning at, Naylor's left arm passed around his throat, from behind; and his left arm pinioned the rifle to the old financier's breast.

In the relentless grip of a man half his age and double his strength, Drace struggled with futile vehe-

mence. The guards he had held off now came trooping up, laughing and preparing to relieve him of the useless gun. Yet, in his vain tussle to get free, Drace plunged forward so furiously that, for an instant, he pulled the unprepared Naylor out of the doorway after him.

And, in that brief instant,—before Naylor could subdue the wildly twisting Drace,—before the approaching guards could close in,—Barry Gale measured his direction and dropped.

His hundred-and-eighty pounds of compact athletic weight, falling from a height of nearly ten feet, smote the busily-wrestling Naylor full on the head and shoulders.

Down went the secretary, as if he had been felled by the blow of a sledge. He dragged down Jared Drace in his tumble. But the old man fell free of the assailant and of the assailed; and he rolled to his feet with scrambling haste, still clutching the rifle.

Barry gathered his legs under him, as he dropped. Hence, the impact which flattened and stunned Naylor did no more than jar the athletic young rancher who had fallen on him.

Now, leaping up, he stood over Naylor, and waited for the onrush of the guards. This rush began with much promptitude, on the part not only of the contingent which Drace had just held at bay, but from those inside the vault. But it stopped as suddenly as it had begun.

For Drace had clapped his back to the gorge's wall, alongside the steel doorway, and he swung his rifle muzzle menacingly from side to side, glaring at both

parties of guards. His wrathful old face was not lovely to look upon in its paroxysm of indignant hate.

And, as the rifle-barrel swayed in their direction, the several heads which had appeared in the vault doorway popped back again with much speed; while the knot of guards outside halted shamblingly and looked first at their fallen leader and then at their own rifles stacked just out of reach.

Barry knew this instant of surprise and indecision could not endure. And already the stunned Naylor was beginning to stir. After a single lightning swift look, Drace had seemed to grasp the import of Gale's own presence there; for he did not so much as glance at him again; but reserved his full attention for the two divided groups of guards. Barry's mind, in the instant of grace, worked quickly.

"How many people know the combination of that vault, sir?" he called, as he bent over the slowly reviving secretary.

"Naylor and I," snapped Drace, without turning. "No one else."

Before the curt reply was finished, Barry Gale was swinging Naylor up in his arms. With one stupendous heave of all his muscles, he whirled his inert burden half way around and flung it bodily in through the gaping doorway of the vault.

The secretary's flying form collided with one or two of the more venturesome of the vault's occupants, who were edging forward from within. Almost before his arms were freed of the man he had hurled, Gale was

tugging at the massive steel door. With all his force he drove it shut.

It closed with a clang. And Barry braced himself against it.

"Quick!" he sang out to Drace, "Give me that rifle and put the combination on;—unless it locks automatically!"

"It does," answered the old man, drily.

And Drace laughed,—actually laughed, aloud;—a crackling and husky laugh, but unmistakably genuine.

"You poor dupes!" he hailed the dumbfounded handful of guards who faced his rifle. "You poor boobs! Don't you see what's happened? Your sublime leader and half your own fellow-blackguards are locked in there. And there, if I choose, they'll stay till Doomsday;—they and the bulk of the treasure they turned traitor for."

He paused to nod approval to Barry, who, leaving the door, and sprung across to the stack of arms and had caught up a rifle. Then he proceeded:

"As for the little portion of the gold that you men have already piled up outside here, this gentleman and I can guard it from you till help comes. By daybreak, the police shall have the name and description of every one of you. An attempt to steal twenty million dollars in gold is a rather serious offence; as you're due to learn. In the meanwhile——"

A scrambling sound from above made him turn his head. But Barry, after a quick glance, still covered the cowering guards, and called to Drace:

"It's all right, sir. Only my sheep herder, come to

take a hand in the game for us. Toni!" he went on, in French, as the Basco gathered himself up, bruised and shaken from the swift descent, "take one of those rifles and help keep those men covered."

The Basco, with a smile of pure happiness, obeyed. And in almost the same instant a hard ridden horse came into the circle of light and drew to a nervous halt. It was Señora. Astride her, sat Maida Drace, pistol in hand.

"I—I lost the way!" panted Maida, staring in amaze at the scene before her. "Is——?"

"Everything is all right!" Barry assured her. "The melodrama villains have proved to be a very cheap set of villains indeed. They——"

He was interrupted by the two rearmost guards who, under shelter of their comrades' forms, turned and bolted into the darkness of the forest behind them. A third fled noisily up the insecure footing of the basalt ridge, whence Barry had tumbled, two days earlier, at Wolfe Naylor's shot.

The rest, at sight of these examples, risked the three rifles by scattering in panic flight into the dark.

"Let them go!" yelled Barry, as Drace sent an ill-aimed bullet after them. "They're as harmless as sheep, now. Their fangs are drawn. They——"

He got no further. The earth swayed and jarred, cutting off his speech. The sulky glow from Lassen swirled up into a column of living flame that shot high in the heavens, making everything as bright as sunlit day.

With a scream of terror Señora bolted. She fled

for the almost perpendicular ridge; and was tearing her stricken way up its sides before Maida could bring her to a halt and spring from her back. Señora, with a wild toss of her head, ripped the bridle free from the girl's grasp and vanished over the ridge-top in a thunderous gallop.

The three men, instinctively, had given chase. Now they crowded about the frightened Maida as she stood on the ridge-side gazing with fascinated dread at the flaming mountain.

The earth's rumble had not passed away, as before. Instead, it increased, every second; till the four could scarce keep their footing as they clung together on the side of the ridge. Then Toni cried out in mortal horror, and pointed downward. The others followed his gaze.

As they looked, they saw the earth in front of them open slowly, as though cleft by an invisible monster knife. The cleft ran jaggedly forward, toward the gorge's mouth. On it moved, and on, in that same rending, relentless progress.

It reached and swallowed the little pile of ingots on the ground. It reached the gorge-mouth and the vault that blocked one side of that mouth. And still it moved on, widening and zigzagging; while all the world heaved and rumbled and tottered.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the earthquake shock ceased. But not before it had opened a score of fissures in the ground, within a radius of a few miles.

And in the bottom of one of those fissures,—perhaps

a mile deep and buried under innumerable tons of rock and dirt, past all possible chance of recovery,—lay some twenty million dollars' worth of gold bars; together with the wreck of a steel-and-concrete vault and the bodies of Wolfe Naylor and his trapped confederates.

Dick O'Rell could never forgive himself for having been lured into lounging over to Romeyn's for a chat, late that afternoon, and for permitting himself to stay so long. But he was a little relieved when, three days later, Barry brought him an odd document to read. The paper was a copy of the confession just obtained at Red Bluff jail from the police-sweated Sludge.

Dick devoured the first part of it;—the part wherein the valet told how he had been bribed into becoming an accomplice of Wolfe Naylor and of acting as a spy on his employer; and of his following Gale home, that first night, at Naylor's order, in an attempt to shoot him if he could do so with any strong chance of safety; and of his retrieving for Naylor the pistol he saw Barry fling into the field.

O'Rell went on with equal speed to scan the tale of the watchful Sludge's hiding in the dark pasture copse as Gale and Maida rode past; and of Zit's attempt to unearth him there. Also of the second night's vigil at the ranch house and the trail of cayenne to check any possible pursuit of the rancher's dog.

Dick read more slowly, and with a puzzled frown, the account of the changing from brogans into list slippers to deaden sound and confuse the trail. And when he

came to a further point in the confession he read twice the following sentences:

"It was easy for me,—Naylor trusting me,—to abstract a bar of gold, from time to time, from the stacks in the cellar. These I hid, separately, in little natural trenches of earth, on an unfrequented hill, covered with bushes. It seemed an ideal cache. I hid five in all, each in a separate trench; and covered them with rubbish. Looking in through a shutter crack, at a window of the ranch house, I saw Mr. O'Rell fingering an ingot he had evidently discovered somewhere or had stolen from one of the guards. I was surprised by Mr. Gale, while looking in; and was forced to run away. I confused the scent with pepper, as aforesaid, and slipped back to the house while they were still seeking me; and purloined the ingot.

"As I was revisiting the hill, to bury this, on the following evening, I saw Mr. Gale. I had just discovered a spade and a pick buried there. The pick I caught up; and tried to kill Mr. Gale with a blow of it; Mr. Naylor, as I have said, having offered me five thousand dollars in bullion if I could get rid of him. I was not successful. Watching the shifting of the gold from the vault, that night, I saw Mr. Gale pass me and lean over the edge of the gorge. There I made my later attempt on his life."

"Gee!" groaned O'Rell, "and all that while, I was listening to Romeyn's oldtimer yarns; till I came home to supper, late, and found you gone! If my watch hadn't stopped, I——"

But he was talking to empty air. Barry, after leav-

ing the confession's copy with him, had gone on toward the Drace estate.

At the entrance to the driveway, he found Maida waiting for him. Very dainty and exquisite she looked, standing there in the soft glow of the sunset. And his heart leaped, at sight of her. Running forward, with outstretched hands, she came to meet him.

"Father is better!" she exclaimed. "Ever so much better, dear! The doctor says he's out of danger, now. All he needs is rest and quiet for a few weeks. Isn't that splendid? And he wants to see you, too. He says so. The doctor says he can. He's ever so nice about our engagement. Not at all as you were afraid he'd be. He——"

"If he needs rest and quiet," suggested Barry, happily, "I suppose that means it will have to be a quiet wedding. Let's have it, soon, too;—so he can have all the quiet he needs while we're off on our honeymoon. There! See how thoughtful of the dear old fellow's comfort I am!"

THE END

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